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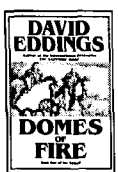

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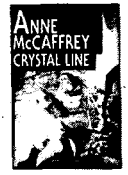

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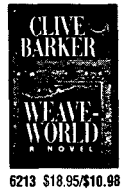

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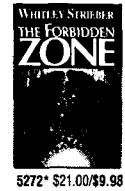

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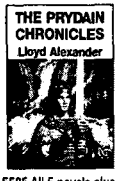

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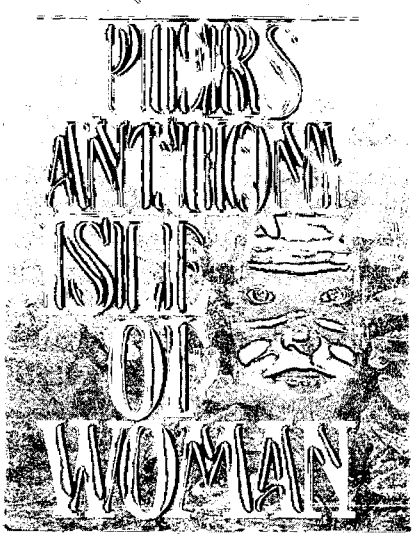

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN LITERARY history, just as in political and military history, there are moments that, had they not occurred, would have changed the world forever. One such moment happened in 1816, when Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron and Byron's doctor, Polidori, exchanged ghost stories in Geneva, Switzerland. From those nights of discussions about politics and science, as well as vampires and the supernatural, came Mary Shelley's classic, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, which is, some claim, the first science fiction novel. Brian W. Aldiss, in his book on the history of science fiction, *The Billion Year Spree* (later updated and reissued as *The Trillion Year Spree)*, calls *Frankenstein* "the first great myth of the industrial age."

But more came out of that period than one novel. The influences back and forth among the writers produced some of the classic poems in the English language — from stanzas in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to Percy Bysshe Shelley's own poem *Prometheus Unbound*. Other writers have written novels about that gathering in Geneva, and a few movies have been made about it, the latest being Ken Russell's *Gothic*.

Yet few of the novels or the movie capture the richness of the period or the complexities of the players. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. William Godwin wrote novels and political tracts. He was involved in England's radical debates, and supported atheism, among other things. Mary Wollstonecraft also contributed to those debates. She wrote about equal rights for men and women under the law, most notably in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Mary Wollstonecraft died eleven days after her daughter was born. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin met her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, when he came to visit her father. Shelley was a free thinker and a radi-

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cal himself who regarded his political views as important as his poetry. He had separated from his wife Harriet, and eloped with Mary Godwin.

They traveled through Switzerland with Mary's half-sister Claire. There they met George Gordon, the 6th Baron Byron of Rachald, who was a well-known author. Lord Byron had traveled extensively through the Middle East, and had become famous when he published parts of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1811. He was born with a club foot, a fact he tried to hide, in daring and sometimes ruthless exploits. He lived in exile after a scandal in London, and died in 1824, helping the Greek patriots in their fights against the Turks.

In fact, Mary Shelley outlived both her husband and Lord Byron. Percy Bysshe Shelley died in 1822; he drowned while sailing the Mediterranean. Mary Shelley continued the literary career she had started with *Frankenstein*, first by collecting her husband's work, and then by writing other novels of her own. Except for *Frankenstein*, most of her work remains unread today.

Frankenstein is better known as a series of films than as a novel, although the novel does hold up. The prose is thick and overly dramatic for today's styles, but the story is strong, and the moral issues it portrays remain with us. *Frankenstein*, like all good science fiction, uses science to reflect on the human condition. Like all good literature, *Frankenstein* never seems to lose its appeal.

For those of you who have never read the novel, do so. Then turn to the novella which ends our anniversary issue, Walter Jon Williams' "Wall, Stone, Craft," an alternate literary history that manages to catch the personalities involved in that period in Geneva, and also evokes the literature on which the novella is based.

It is appropriate, I think, to publish a story about Mary Shelly and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron in F&SF's anniversary issue. For if they had not gathered in 1816 to discuss politics, argue about science and tell ghost stories, SF might not exist in this form.

And that would be a great loss, indeed.

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Robert Reed's most recent appearance in F&SF *was in our June issue with his story "Guest of Honor." Bantam Spectra published his novel,* The Remarkables, *last year. He leads our anniversary issue with a lovely science fiction story, "Fable Blue."*

Fable Blue

By Robert Reed

HE WAS BORN IN A REMOTE village high up near the Blue, and his mother took him at once and swallowed him whole, holding his half-formed body safe inside her stomach. His father fed them and cared for them and talked sweetly to his wife, as new fathers do. She was Yio, quiet and loving. Strun had been her husband for years, but this was only their first child. Naming a once-born is considered bad luck, but the village began to call the boy "Miracle." After all, Strun and Yio were middle-aged people, their carapaces glowing with the dull, softened colors of grandparents, and poor Strun had lost three arms since his prime. Yet here they were, suddenly parents, and Strun had to work like a young man, using experience in place of vigor to provide for his growing family.

The entire village attended the boy's final birth, and he was named Wyll, which means "Little Miracle." Smaller than most children, Wyll nonetheless proved strong for his size, and smart too. He acted shy and said little, but when he did speak his carapace was full of vivid colors, bright and exuberant

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— blues deeper than the Blue itself and reds that nearly burned the eyes watching him.

Strun was proud of his son, as was his right, and the village tolerated the old man's occasional boasts.

Yio was a protective mother, fearful and alert.

That Wyll seemed odd was mentioned from time to time. A dreamy boy, some said. Lazy, others claimed. Yet boys are not men, and everyone hoped that Little Miracle would replace his father in every way. "Time changes," it is said, "and nothing changes." Today Wyll might seem distant, but someday he would inherit Strun's traplines, taking his living from the edges of the Blue. His good work would enrich the village, making everyone happy and proud.

What better way is there to spend one's life?

Blue is misery's color.

The Blue itself means death. It is where the ocean ends — a great void named for its daytime color — and it kills through suffocation and dehydration and countless other terrors. Some say that the Blue holds the World in its grip. Most people never see it, living deep in the ocean, but everyone knows about it and everyone tells stories about it. Wealthy people pay dearly for slivers of cured meat that come from the Blue. For while it means death to people, the Blue is home to a multitude of strange beasts who walk the dry land and soar in the void itself, and who can be lured down to the ocean when the tides are low.

Men like Strun have always made their livings with traplines. They are accustomed to the bright warm waters, and they use every trick. Special shields protect their large eyes from sunlight. The moon's motions and the tides are known by heart. They swim up near the Blue when the tides are peaking, setting fancy traps and camouflaging them. No one was better than Strun. He could guess where some careless animal or void-soarer would step. Then with the next high tide he would return, finding his quarry drowned and waiting for him. For just as the Blue is deadly to people, the water is deadly to them, the two worlds antagonistic and separated by a vanishingly thin boundary.

Strun would take his prizes to a little city below the village. He'd cure the meat himself, leaving it on the bone to prove its authenticity. The buyers

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knew him as honest and reliable. Strun never disguised fishmeat as something rare. He didn't dye a void-soarer's feathers to enhance its worth. And he was a shrewd judge of what each piece was worth, knowing his market and usually receiving the best deal possible.

His family wanted for nothing. Wyll was well-fed and rich with toys, and Strun brought gifts every time he came back from the city. He even brought fancy children's books — flat machines that glowed like a person's carapace, telling stories with colors and shapes. Wyll was envied by his peers, yet he didn't boast about his good fortune or even seem aware of it. He shared what he owned, almost without thought, and because of that he had an assortment of friends, mostly younger and liking him for the gifts.

One day Strun caught something very rare. The creature must have been wading in the ocean after the tide turned. The trap pinned its leg, and the waves covered it soon afterward. Its body was upright and hairless, save for a little furry tuft on the ugly head. It tasted odd — that night they ate one of its smaller limbs — and Strun cured the rest with seaweed extracts and weakfish blood. Sometimes rarities brought nothing from the buyers. This beast resembled nothing else, and Strun had little hope. Yet when he pulled the carcass from its sack there was a tangible excitement throughout the market. Not even the sharpest buyers could hide their mood. Strun decided to hold an auction, and in the end he was paid ten times what he would have accepted. Silver cylinders rattled in his money sack. He made glad yellow colors, asking the highest bidder, "What makes this worth so much?"

"Its rarity, and the strange look about it." The man laughed, then admitted, "Some people think its meat is particularly clean, no filthy hair and all that...."

"If I catch more of them," asked Strun, "will you pay me the same rate?"

"I doubt if you can. They're extremely hard to trap."

"But if I do, will you pay me?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll bring more of them," Strun promised.

"Sure! Be my guest!"

Their deal was struck, then Strun asked what else the buyer knew. "This is a young one, for instance." The buyer grasped the upper limp with several of his arms. "This thing can grasp. Here, at the end. Not a strong grasp like ours, but enough to pry itself free of most traps. You're lucky it was young

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and small and that the tide came over it. I've done this work for years, but this is only my third Twos. The third one that I've seen, mind you. The first that I've been able to buy."

"Twos?"

"What people call them. You see? Two of everything, sort of. An odd shape all around." The buyer's words faded into the cold dark water around them. "There's no stranger creature anywhere, Strun. Unless you're talking about people."

Yellow laughter filled the little market.

USING HIS windfall, Strun bought new tools and new metal parts made in distant factories. In the next months he devised a brand-new trap. Wyll helped him. The boy had a knack for anticipating what would work, and together they built and tested the invention. Then Strun took him for the first time, showing him where and how to set up, then returning with Wyll to check on their luck.

Wyll was full of questions, particularly about the Blue and the strange animals living in it. What substance made up the void? Did it extend to the moon? To the sun? How far did the dry lands extend? And wouldn't it be amazing to see the land, if only for an instant — ?

"That's crazy talk," his father warned him. "In fact, don't talk at all. The animals can see your words in the water."

They caught nothing exceptional, just ordinary void-soarers and a fat little weed-rat. But one of the new traps had been destroyed, buried under rocks. Had the Twos spotted it? Had they thrown the rocks? If so, they were clever and Strun had underestimated his quarry. He took more care with hiding them, and he baited them with fresh-killed fish, years of experience telling him where a walking creature would stop before reaching. Several days later, he caught a new Twos, the trap snapping shut and a second trigger sprung, a taut cable winding onto a spool far below and the prize dragged underwater in moments.

They ate none of the meat themselves. Strun made a special trip to the city, taking Wyll with him; and the buyer was thrilled, telling them, "See the belly? The bulge? She's carrying a child, do you see? Oh, my clients will pay for this one!"

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"Maybe I've earned a bonus," Strun suggested.

The buyer complained, but this was business. They settled on a modest bonus, and afterward, trying to make amends, the buyer told him, "I hope to see you again! Soon!"

Wyll said nothing during the long swim home.

"What's the matter?" Strun asked, tired of his son's pale gray carapace. "Is something bothering you?"

"No. Nothing."

"Something is the matter," his father maintained.

But Wyll would only put out all of his arms, uncurling them, the gesture older than any words and meant to show he was hiding nothing. Nothing at all.

Strun found new baits and new ways to present them.

Sometimes he placed barrel clams above the low-tide mark, and when he returned he found them smashed by rocks, their meats gone. Even clever animals could be lulled into indifference, he reasoned; after several months of careful feeding, he would set a single trap nearby, seemingly by accident. A large male paid for its carelessness, and Strun used the new money to build better traps. Instead of cumbersome brass jaws, he decided on fancy wire nooses. Two small males were pulled to their deaths; and afterward, Strun's reputation spread throughout the high country, every village knowing about him.

He was wise enough to downplay his success. Too much pride would make others angry, he knew; and besides, he didn't want to encourage too many trappers. He told his neighbors some of his tricks, making them promise to tell no one; but they were impatient and clumsy, their baits stolen and their traps smashed under barrages of rock.

Wyll benefited from it all. Strun brought him a new book — a thick and elaborate history of civilization — and the boy spent countless days in his room, the book fixed to a rock wall and telling its stories with sharp colors and intricate shapes. Sometimes Yio would look in on him, feeling a motherly disquiet. Was he having a good time? Did he need anything? A few times she tried to read with him, but the density of the picture-words was beyond her abilities. Scholars and fancy people spoke this way. Not simple villagers at the edge of the World.

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"Do you understand all of this, Wyll? Can you really?"
"Of course," the boy replied. "Yes, I can."

That was a lie, but not much of one. Wyll couldn't follow most of the names, and the distant places seemed more fictional than real. But the story itself was powerful and horribly sad. He read how the Confederation had been built through warfare. For millennia, the city-states had tried to dominate one another. The cities near the deep ocean vents were first to purify and shape the first metal tools. They learned how to culture the hot-water bacteria, selecting strains that in turn concentrated different flavors of metal, and craftsmen used stone molds to create the best weapons in the World. The Confederation was dominated by those victorious cities. They were the seats of government and learning, and every new wonder — electricity and thinking machines and books like this one — came from them and proved their superiority.

Misery, blue and bright. Wyll felt misery when he read the accounts of famous battles, and he felt guilt for things he couldn't quite name. He understood that he was squeamish and weak, and sometimes it was all he could manage to keep that flaw hidden. And it was a flaw. He realized it that day when he and his father were in the market, the buyer explaining that the Twos was pregnant. All Wyll could see was a once-born baby starving inside its dead mother, the image preying on him for days. The Twos meant good things for him and his parents, and why was he so weak? These were animals, after all. Clever, but not civilized. They had no tools, unless one counted rocks...but then again, he knew almost nothing about them and their lives. Father seemed puzzled by his questions and his endless speculations. "I don't know what life's like in the Blue," Strun would say. "I wish I knew, I can tell you. It would help me with my trapping!"

The Confederation was enormous. And what is more, there were nations on its north and south, not civilized like them but building better weapons every year. The history book ended with warnings about these barbarians, but Wyll took a different lesson. Ages ago, he realized, people didn't have tools and thinking machines. They were as simple as the Twos were today, and maybe the Twos weren't merely clever. Maybe they were a younger species, and if given time and luck they would invent their own wonders.

"Come on," his father told him. "I need some help. You can read later,

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but help me now."

They swam up to the Blue, reaching it at high-tide. Strun needed his son's strength to help unjam a cable and drum, but first they set the trap above it, baiting it with something new. Strun had found a lovely chunk of rock, bright and enticing. At least he hoped it would prove enticing. Setting the triggers, they retreated and repaired the drum as the tide fell. Intuition made Strun say, "Wait here," once they were done. It was evening by then. Sunlight was a mild red glow. They removed their eye shields and slid into shadows; and after a little while the trap was sprung, the drum turning in front of them. The cable hummed, sometimes jerking side to side, and a strange wet noise grew louder.

Wyll felt cold and simple. The struggling Twos appeared before him, still very much alive, limbs kicking and its grasping limb bleeding where the wire cut into its meat. It was a male, not small and not large, drowning while they watched. The strange little eyes saw them in the dark water, and its face changed, the ugly mouth opening and shimmering bits of the void itself bursting free. It was amazing to see. It made him sad. Wyll watched the void flying skyward, seeking its source; the creature thrashed and squealed; then Wyll approached it, curious and terrified in equal measure, and a free limb managed to grab at him, living flesh brushing against him for a horrible instant.

Wyll flinched and retreated, red flashes betraying his fear.

His father laughed, telling him, "You'll get used to it. Don't worry." Then the Twos was dead, and Strun removed the snare and stuffed the carcass into a mesh sack. "Help me cure the meat," he said. "I'll show you how it's done."

"No," Wyll replied.

His father kept laughing, still amused. "It looks difficult," he responded, "but I'll teach you my tricks."

"No."

"Why not? You have to learn someday."

But the boy thought to himself: Never. I will never learn any more about this, never. Never.

There were no more Twos for a long while. Strun decided they were getting too smart and needed to be spoiled some more, but none of the barrel

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clams that he offered were broken open. Fancy rocks were left undisturbed, as were half-hidden traps. Intuition told him that the Twos were all dead or all moved to some other place, which was normal enough. Fish and beasts wander; it is their nature. Only people could love a single place enough never to leave it.

But someday they would return. If not in his lifetime, he reasoned, then perhaps in his son's lifetime. That's why Strun stored his traps in oil, safe from corrosions, and why he continued planting barrel clams on the high rocks. It was an investment that served Wyll as well as his unborn grandchildren, and the village itself.

One day strangers arrived, half a dozen of them, riding inside a strange metal contraption bigger than any machine Strun had ever imagined. Even in the city there was nothing like it, spinning wheels and jets of water making it move with ease. And the passengers looked odd in little ways, in their carapaces' curves and the precise colors of their words. Each one of them carried a strange machine or two, and one of them said, "We're looking for Strun. Where can we find Strun?"

The old trapper came forward, worried but trying not to show it. "What do you want?" he asked them.

They were scholars. They came from the Confederation's largest and oldest university in hopes of finding him. Was it true that he'd caught Twos on a regular basis? Did he appreciate how rare it was to see even one of them in a lifetime? In the last year, by himself, Strun had become a legend among the wealthy. That was how they had heard of him and this village, and each of the scholars had to touch arms with him and claim that this was a great honor to meet him.

Their little machines were fancy, new, and powerful. They explained them in simple ways, but Strun was baffled, falling on his son's help with the hardest parts. "They've come to talk with the Twos," Wyll said, his words bright with excitement. "They've studied them on a different coast. They know how they speak to each other."

"Animals?" Strun groaned. "Speaking animals?"

"We don't call them animals," a young woman corrected. "Never."

"What are they? Seaweed?"

They ignored those words. A different scholar said, "We want to pay you for your help, your time, and experience." He seemed to be in charge of the

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others. "Show us where you find these creatures, and we'll be most grateful."

Strun was no fool, and these fancy deep-sea people had a fraction of the cunning found in any market buyer. It was amusing to watch them compliment him for everything he did, no matter how trivial. His home was lovely; his son was adorable. His wife was a great beauty, and she knew just how to spice the rainbow fish. Would he take them to the Blue? Perhaps tonight, while it was dark? Yes? "Yes," Strun answered, smiling in secret ways. "If you finish the rainbow fish, I will."

More fish? Of course, of course! They practically fought each other for shares; and Yio, taking her husband aside, said to him, "Be careful, will you? Promise me. I'm worrying, like always. I know. But please take care of yourselves, will you, please?"

Strun and Wyll took them. There were complaints about the warm water and its foreign, land-flavored taste; but when they arrived everyone was quiet. The tide was rising fast. Strun showed them the best places, and the scholars busied themselves setting up their machines according to some master plan.

"Twos speak with sound, not light," claimed the young woman. "We learned this years ago. Or our predecessors did, I mean. It must seem bizarre to you, I'm sure, but once that was understood, all kinds of progress has been made."

It made sense to Strun. A lot of fish spoke with throbs and whistles and other sounds. It was a primitive, clumsy way to communicate, but what more did animals need?

Wyll asked, "Can I speak with them? With the Twos?"

"No, no, no," laughed the woman. "No, we don't know *that* much yet. For now we're leaving listening devices above the low-tide line, and they're connected to special machines down below. Those machines decide which sounds belong to the Twos and what those sounds might mean. I know that seems impossible — "

Silly, thought Strun.

" — but what we learned before is helpful. And the machines are designed after military machines, ones meant to make and break codes. A noble twisting of an ignoble purpose, don't you think?" She waved a dozen arms with excitement. "Someday, perhaps not too far off, we'll be able to

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converse with a few of them, in a limited way — "

Strun laughed, interrupting her.

The leader ignored the laugh, saying with great patience, "We need your promise to help us, sir. Will you leave your machines in place?"

"So long as I can keep trapping the Twos."

"No!" the woman shrieked.

"But I have to make my living," Strun protested.

The leader made soothing colors, then asked, "How many Twos do you catch in a month? Can you estimate their number?"

"Ten, Strun claimed.

Wyll looked at him with astonished eyes, saying nothing.

"Ten?" asked the leader, plainly startled.

"That's my count, yes. Ten of them every month."

"Very well." A deal was struck, leaving the university a little poorer and Strun wealthy by every measure. "But you have to keep luring the Twos to this place," said the leader. "Leave food for them. Any reasonable trick, if you could. We appreciate all of your help, believe me."

Such simple people, Strun was thinking. Beneath their education, they were nearly children, all of them full of ideas and none of the ideas pragmatic. Yet he couldn't feel too disgusted, since some of them, particularly that one odd woman, reminded him a little bit of his own son.

SHE WAS named Hyon, and when the scholars had enough of the heat and sunlight, Hyon volunteered to remain behind, tending to the machinery after they left. Wyll fell in love with her in no time, following her everywhere and helping with every small chore. He learned about the fancy decoders. Finally he had someone who could answer his questions about the Blue and the Twos themselves. He absorbed her stories about far cities and the great university, and he could practically see the glowing towers where knowledge was dispensed to thousands of students at once. Could a boy from such a remote place hope to go there someday and learn? Oh, yes! Hyon came from an equally remote village, one of the floating ones anchored beneath the Seaweed Forest. Hard work and a good mind were what the scholars demanded. Health and connections helped, but only so far.

She loved speaking about the Twos, always beginning with the words,

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"We know next to nothing about them," and then painting vivid images of their lives. They were peaceful creatures, she maintained. Most scholars felt they had no other choice. Twos lived by wandering the World's dry lands, unable to make anything more elaborate than simple stone tools. Vegetables and some meats had been found in their stomachs, but the meats were almost certainly from carrion. They'd make awful hunters, she reasoned. They had such tiny teeth and weak builds. The university had dozens of them in storage, and she'd looked at their faces for days on end. It was obvious to her — the creatures were innocent, pure, and nearly perfect. Living as they did, wandering without possessions and without the encumbrance of nations, they could exist outside of politics and corruption of greed.

Wyll didn't understand how she got from "We know next to nothing about them" to these broad statements about a Twos' nature. But that didn't matter. He loved everything about the woman. Did she feel the same toward him? She gave no outward sign of minding his presence. Indeed, she seemed grateful for his help, particularly when she wanted the fancy listeners moved from place to place. In payment, she taught him how they worked, how they absorbed sounds and how when the time came they would make their own sounds, mimicking those strange voices in the void.

"Twos speak according to rules," she promised. "The early work was done north of here, many days north, and we used cruder machines. Hopefully these Twos have similar rules. If they do, and if they come by again, then it may not take long at all."

Hyon played old recordings, and Wyll listened and thought they seemed lovely, even strained through the water. But he had to ask why the scholars hadn't gone back to the old coast? Why come here instead?

"Mistakes were made," Hyon confessed. "Awful mistakes, really."

He asked what she meant.

"It was the people, the local people...." Blue colors bled into the words. "They used our machines to lure them down by the water, then they tripped a huge snare and captured several dozen at once. Captured them and drowned them, then sold their meat."

"That's awful," said Wyll.

"People are so wicked," she told him.

Wyll was remembering the young male drowning before him, feeling anguish but not daring to say anything.

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"And the Twos are wondrous creatures," she promised. "They must be! One day we'll speak with them, and you know what will happen? They'll teach us! The Twos will be inspirations to us. They'll show us how to live. The Confederation will be transformed by their wisdom. Like fresh honeyhearts in water, their words will dissolve in our ocean and leave it sweet to the taste."

What a strange, lovely girl! Even when she made no sense, he knew that he would never see anyone so lovely again.

"This work is my life," she promised him.

"And mine too," he replied; but already Hyon had turned away, working on one of her machines.

Their fight was a culmination of small episodes and minor frictions. Strun had trouble coaxing his son to help him, and Wyll made a point of criticizing his father and this life. The village was tiny and ugly and backward, he would say. It was full of ignorant people who were proud of their ignorance. Murdering the Twos was wrong, he added. It was a crime and an embarrassment, and that's when Strun couldn't stand it any longer.

"What do you mean, murder? What murder?" he exploded. "Since when does the well-being of animals hang over you and me?"

Wyll tried to make him understand what was obvious. He spoke about brain dimensions and the ramifications of language —

"How do you know the size of their brains?" his father interrupted. "Did the Twos measure themselves and tell you?'

That wasn't the issue here, and his father was a fool. Just like the rest of the villagers, he knew less than nothing. "Fool." The word leaked out of Wyll without warning, and someone new said:

"Who's a fool? Who?"

Yio had come into the room. She was stunned and afraid, drifting beside them with her arms limp.

They scarcely noticed her. Wyll told his father, "You're a killer, a thoughtless murderer," and Strun assured him, "I've done everything for you! Only you!"

"Please," Yio whispered. "Please stop...."

"Everything," said Strun one final time.

"Then you're an idiot, old man!"

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Everyone paused for a moment, the room almost dark.

Then Wyll said, "A stupid old fool," and his mother cried out, "You don't mean it!"

Finally they realized she was there. They had an audience, and maybe it was shame and maybe it was her desperate attempts to soothe them. Yio said, "You can't fight this way, I won't allow it," and Wyll responded:

"All right. We won't!"

No more arguing. He left the room, the house and his books, vowing that he'd never return. Wyll had a huge anger, vivid and translucent; the anger had its own life and demands, undiminished even after days. Just the thought of his father made him physically ill, weak and trembling. Yio brought him his favorite books, trying to make amends, and his rage spilled onto her too. She begged him to return and apologize, and she promised that Strun would apologize in turn. "It's not worth hating each other," she assured him. But Wyll knew otherwise and told her so.

"I'm staying with friends for now," he reported. "Eventually I'm leaving for the university. You won't see me again, Mother."

She looked tiny and old, her colors slow and muddled together.

"Leave me alone," he said, throwing his books aside for emphasis.

"I'll leave your room as it is," she promised.

"Go!"

"As you wish...."

She was weak, thought Wyll. As weak as his father was strong, and he hated them for these qualities. Then he thought of the Twos, filling himself with intentional shame, remembering when they'd eaten part of the first Two and how they had enjoyed it, golden colors flowing through their home and fading everywhere but in his grieving self.

Hyon kept working, oblivious to the family problems. She didn't ask where Wyll was living. It was enough that he showed up at her little crudely made house, offering his help. She was busy and frustrated, then busier and excited. One day the Twos returned to the coast, the listening devices hearing their voices and the thinking machines beginning to pick at the meanings. She told Wyll, "It's going perfectly!" and he tried to act happy, watching her work and never quite getting in the way.

Would he take them some barrel clams? she wondered. Of course, yes.

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Plus he remembered their interest in shiny rocks, and he left them as gifts, sometimes laying them out in patterns — circles and fancy stars — making sure the Twos would know they were intentional.

One day he saw Strun swimming toward the Blue, and Wyll wondered if he was going to set up traps again. But he couldn't make himself face the man, swimming the other way and hoping that he hadn't been seen. It was Hyon who met with his father and learned that no, he was just leaving weakfish at high tide. "He's doing what the university is paying him to do," she reported. "Now that the Twos have returned, he says that he has to earn his money."

"All he cares about is money," Wyll muttered.

Hyon scarcely noticed, returning to the machinery, arms working the controls according to some plan. She showed Wyll how to draw simple words and how the words were translated into sounds, mimicking voices; then any responses were absorbed and digested, none of them making sense but the machinery learning more with every low tide.

Wyll stayed with her for days, neither of them sleeping long or talking about anything but the Twos. This was an historic time, she claimed, and for a thousand years people would remember her and her glorious work. There were several dozen Twos above them; the machines recognized each of their voices. One night one of the Twos said, "Who are you?" A listener sent the sound below, and the question "Who are you?" appeared on the glowing screen.

Hyon gasped and wrote, "People. People."

The word was translated as well as possible, then came a long pause. Then, at last, the Two replied, "More fish. I like the fish."

It was a great, perfect moment. The girl grabbed Wyll and squeezed with all of her arms, and he squeezed back and felt splendid. The recent past dissolved. "What do we say next?" Hyon asked. Wyll considered, then said, "How about 'Who are you?'"

"Perfect!"

They drew the question on the screen.

"People," was the answer. The many-armed symbol for people appeared before them; and Hyon said, "It's the best the machines can manage."

Wyll touched the symbol with the tip of a single arm.

Then it vanished, and the Two was telling them, "Give us more fish! We

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want to eat more of the fish!"

Hyon studied the Twos for many days, learning more as the machinery became more adept with the language. Then came a sudden change, odd and unexpected. Some of the Twos had changed their language, muddling the translations; and Wyll couldn't feed all of them. He was buying fish from the villagers, and his father must have been doing the same thing nearby. Yet all at once there were too many Twos, and Hyon was confused, then worried. "They're talking to each other," she said. "I hear them. I think there's a second group of them."

"What are they saying?"

She played recordings. The voices were louder than before, shrill and swirled together. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"I do not know," Hyon confessed.

One morning both of them swam up to the Blue, bringing bundles of fresh weakfish; and they discovered dead Twos floating against the bright sunshine. A dozen of them, maybe more. The poor creatures' heads were smashed, blood still seeping from the wounds. Hyon was in shock. She fled back below, leaving Wyll to set the bundles in the rocks. Afterward he found her with the machines, and as soon as the tide had dropped, she began to call to the Twos. "People," she said, "where are you?"

One language answered. "Thank you for the fish," they told her, no mention made of the dead.

Hyon asked about the bodies. What had happened?

"We killed them," said one voice. "Snuck up in the dark and killed them."

"Invaders," said a second Two. "Thieves!"

Others made foul sounds loosely translated into curses.

Hyon made colors of grief, unable to reply. She turned off the machinery and began swimming toward her house, and Wyll didn't understand until he saw her placing a few possessions into sacks, preparing to leave. Where was she going?

"Home. To the university." She was sick with disappointment and grief. The Twos were nothing like she had imagined, her life's meaning wrung right out of her. "Store the machines, will you? I'll send someone to retrieve them."

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He didn't want Hyon to leave. Wyll panicked, flinging his arms over her and grasping as a lover might, arms curling and her too shocked to respond at first. Then she spun and got free, asking, "What are you doing? Leave me alone!"

A mistake. He'd made one and knew it, and he was trying too hard.

Hyon said, "I've got to pack. Bring back my machines, will you?"

"I want to go with you. Take me to the university!"

She gazed at him, dumbfounded and then laughing, with a shrill tone. "What would you do there? An ignorant, inbred peasant like you — ?"

"But you said — "

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "I don't want to think about this place. Never again!"

Wyll could have told her that she had no choice, that awful things had their own lives and memories, inhabiting the mind without invitations. But she'd find that out for herself, he knew. It was the closest thing to revenge that he could imagine. "You'll learn it like I did," he whispered, and she paid him no attention whatsoever.

Something occurred to Wyll while he was recovering the listeners.

It was night, him hovering in the dark water and the void not an arm's width above him. And suddenly he was speaking, the tide starting to turn and his words bleeding up into the night air. He could see the partial moon. Shouting each word, he tried hard to make himself visible; and after a little while he saw motion, upright figures approaching and then stopping, then coming closer, his colors washing over them.

Arms touched the Blue and lived. There was the sensation of emptiness and a strange absence of heat, but nothing more than that. Wyll found himself splashing while he shouted, the Twos unable to comprehend anything but intrigued by the show. They'd never seen their benefactor, he realized. He wished he could climb free of the ocean and join them...if only...and he suddenly saw that he was floating in a pool, his escape route too shallow to cross. Panic made him fling and twist. His carapace screamed in bright colors. The Twos were stunned, stepping back, limbs across their squinting eyes.

Eventually the sun rose, blinding Wyll in turn.

The tidal pool was hot and stale, waters seeping away between the rocks.

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There was pain, but it was never worse than miserable. Wyll felt anger at himself and no one else, forgiving the world once he realized that he was dying. And the Twos seemed to understand the seriousness, coming close and sometimes grabbing at him, trying to pull him somewhere. Would they eat him? He tried to tell them that they should, in payment for his past crimes. But instead they splashed into the pool together, perhaps a couple dozen of them, grasping each other beneath him and screaming as one, bodily lifting him and the water sliding off his body and the void around him, them carrying Wyll over the rocks and back into the ocean again, and all the while him thinking:

I'll tell everyone I was in the Blue, if only for this long....

Strun didn't know about the breakthrough or the subsequent disappointments; he'd worked to avoid the strange woman and Wyll, first out of anger and then because Yio begged him to keep his distance. She feared another fight, as bad as or worse than the first one. She was hoping that this nonsense about leaving for the university would pass — a misplaced love interest; a youthful illusion — and the news that Hyon had left suddenly, and alone, made her very happy. "You know," she told Strun, "a lot of the girls here would want Wyll, if he just tried."

Probably so, he thought. They'd like the money that he'd inherit in a few years.

"She just packed and left, I understand." Yio was sparkling with the news. "She took her personal belongings, nothing more. She couldn't swim away fast enough."

Strun felt a vague disquiet.

"Maybe he'll come home tonight. Maybe." Yio tickled him with a couple arms, then made dinner for three. "Maybe soon," she said all night; then in the morning, the first light red and faint, she said, "Maybe today."

Strun swam up toward the Blue with a sack full of rock prawn, that sense of disquiet larger and more insistent. He spotted the unattended machines, and out of curiosity he turned them on and read the words that appeared on the false carapace.

"Are you all right?" he saw.

"Answer us!" someone was saying.

"Can you hear us, Person? Have you made it home?"

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Strun set the sack down and swam higher, not with urgency yet but aware of his hearts and little details in the rocks and how there were too many scavenger fish in the area. For an instant he didn't notice his son, the body already losing its shape and all the color washed out of it. Wyll looked more like a mass of gelatin than any person, and when Strun knew it was a body — him floating above it, staring hard through the bright waters — it was as if he knew everything in an instant and knew nothing at the same time, his self just sipping little doses of the knowledge and not even a taste of the grief beginning. This was not his son; this was someone else. A stranger, no doubt, and what should he do? Take him to the village, of course. Right away. And so long as he believed it was a stranger, Strun was fine. He was resourceful and calm, knitting a quick seaweed sack for the unfortunate fellow — yes, he was male, and young by the looks of it — and he swam past the machines, so fancy and useless, and for some reason paused and stared at the words as they formed.

"Are you safe, friend? You did not look well when we saw you last."

Strun opened the sack, and for the first time he saw his dead son.

"We are worried. Can you hear us, person? Friend?"

The old man touched the false carapace, making it go blank. Then he drew a single word with the delicate tip of an arm. "I hear you," the word meant.

"You are alive!" came the response.

He felt too alive, really.

"We are hungry, friend! Our children are hungry!"

Again he looked at Wyll, and his emotions seeped out of him. Blue is the color of misery in people, and the water around him and his dead son was a rich deep blue, color without shapes and no meaning past the color and its strength; and even later, when he made his carapace turn gray, that blueness persisted as an afterimage, almost burned into the flesh itself.

There was a funeral; the entire village attended.

Yio went into mourning, and her friends worried about her well-being, sometimes catching a glimpse of her in a doorway, her appearance that of someone very ill. She lost weight and strength and color. Eventually she could speak only in total darkness, and then only if everyone around her said nothing at all. She missed her son, she told them. But he had been a miracle

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in the first place, and now he was safe in the afterlife. "Have you seen Strun?" she asked them. "I'm worried about my husband. This was a horrible shock for him, and he blames himself, which is wrong. If you see him, tell him. Tell him that none of this is his fault, will you please?"

Strun vanished after the funeral. Someone saw him at Hyon's little house, carrying her fancy books away; then later he returned in a rush, removing every one of his fancy traps from storage, making a series of trips up to the Blue.

"He blames the Twos," said the villagers. "They murdered his son, and now he's going to kill all of them."

They thought this was a good thing, in truth. A justice.

"Do you want help?" someone asked him. "Strun? Can we help you with your work?"

"Later," he told everyone, pressing on and nobody brave enough to follow.

There was no killing the Twos, however. Not for justice, nor for profit. One evening, just as the last hint of the sun vanished, Strun returned home and spoke to his wife at length, then called for his neighbors to gather and see what he had to say. He had an announcement of great importance. With poor shriveled Yio beside him, he looked out at a hundred or so people — old and not; friends and not; the tough and determined people that his son had called ignorant — and he said, "We're giving you all of our property, my traplines, from the Mud River to Weakfish Point. It's yours from today, but there are rules. You must do certain things from now until the end of time."

No one spoke, everyone watching him, waiting for the next astonishing words.

EVENTUALLY THE university found a replacement for Hyon. He wasn't as eager as she had been, and he wasn't a natural traveler. It was more than a year before he reached the village, surprised to find it prosperous by any measure. The children had the best books and toys. The houses were braced with expensive stone arches. He asked for Wyll and learned that the boy was dead. Then what about some man named Strun? People directed him to an ancient fellow, vigorous despite missing three arms. The new scholar identified himself, complimented Strun on his fine home, then asked what had

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happened to Hyon's notes and the very expensive machines that she had left behind.

Strun said, "That girl was crazy."

The scholar had much the same opinion, but he wouldn't admit it to this man.

"We sold that stuff," Strun admitted. "All of it."

"Sold it where? To whom?"

"In the city, and I don't know the buyer's name. Sorry."

The scholar was agitated, scarcely able to speak. He took a long look at the village while he collected himself, watching a team of people pulling some kind of carcass past them. A single hooved limb protruded from the sack, unlike any limb he had ever seen. A meaty body was attached, probably worth a fortune to its owners —

"Nobody came to claim the machines," said Strun, "and so we sold them. You didn't care about them, so why not?"

"But we do care! How can I do my work without them?"

"You should have come sooner," the old man informed him.

The scholar took a different course, telling him, "They're worth a fortune. You don't know how much — "

"How much?"

He made a quick estimate, thinking the number was large enough to intimidate anyone. But instead Strun said, "Wait," and vanished into his house, returning with a sack of new gold cylinders. "This should be enough. Is it?"

Yes, it was. Probably too much, and the poor man had to move to the next sticking point. "Where are Hyon's notes?"

"Lost, I think. But I can help you look for them."

The research was going to have to start again, the scholar sensed. And probably on some other piece of coastline too. The two of them swam through the village, and several times he saw more people pulling carcasses into deeper water. He stopped one group and asked to have a closer look. In the sack was a furred animal that he didn't know, clawed paws and menacing fangs implying a predatory nature. Where did they find it? "Sometimes the rivers flood," said one young man. "Bodies are pushed out to sea then." This body had been killed with spear points, and someone had gutted it before it rotted. What would such an enormous, wondrous beast bring on the open

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market? More than a scholar would ever make, he was certain. More than a hundred lifetimes could give him.

"This is where the crazy girl lived," Strun announced.

It was a haphazard pile of stones, the only room totally empty. "She said that she left her notes here," the scholar admitted. "I don't see them."

"Maybe she lied. Crazy people aren't the best workers."

This was such a disaster. He had traveled halfway across the ocean, and for what? Then he felt the weight of the gold, terrible ideas filling his mind.

Strun was saying, "You can stay here, if you wish. If you're going to keep doing the work — "

"No."

" — although without the machines and notes, I don't know how anyone can expect you to try."

A young man was swimming nearby, carrying a sack up the rocky slope. The scholar approached him and took the sack, opening it and seeing an assortment of spearheads and jawed traps and wired nooses. That's when he realized the truth, or something at least approaching what was true. He returned to the old man and said, "You're trading with the Twos, aren't you? You're using our machines — "

"Not your machines. Ours. We just purchased them."

The scholar rattled his sack, feeling the gold against its skin. "Meat for weapons, is that it?"

"I don't know what you mean," Strun lied.

"They hunt for you, don't they? The Twos do?"

Strun said, "Maybe you should leave. Take your earnings and make a nice home for yourself. That's my advice, son."

The scholar felt powerless and angry because of it. Hoping to wound, he told the old man, "I'll go someplace of consequence. Someplace at the center of everything."

"But that's here, my boy." A contemptuous green flowed over Strun's carapace; then he said, "This is the only important place in the world right now. You just don't see it yet."

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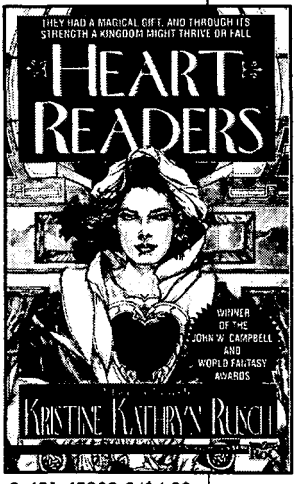
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Jane Yolen has written over 130 books. She is the past president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and Editor in Chief of a science fiction and fantasy imprint at HBJ Children's Books. Her fiction has been nominated for the Nebula award three times. She won the World Fantasy Award and "tons of children's book awards," including the Kerlan Award and the Regina Medal.

About the story, she writes, "Some of it is true. I was a teenager in Westport, Connecticut, went to Staples High School there, and stood on many a vigil with my Quaker cousins Bert and Honey Knopp who were nothing *like anyone in the story. But I'm a girl!"*

The Snatchers

By Jane Yolen

YOU COULD SAY IT ALL BEGAN in 1827 (though my part of it didn't start until 1963) because that was the year Tsar Nicholas I decided to draft Jews into the army. Before that, of course, only Russian peasants and undesirables had to face the awful twenty-five year service.

But it was more than just service to the state the Jewish boys were called to do. For them, being in the army meant either starvation — for they would not eat non-kosher food — or conversion. No wonder their parents said kaddish for them when they were taken.

After Tsar Nicholas' edict, the army drafted sons of tax evaders and sons of Jews without passports. They picked up runaways and dissidents and cleaned the jails of Jews. Worst of all, they forced the *kahal*, the Jewish Community Council, to fill a quota of thirty boys for every one thousand Jews on the rolls — and those rolls contained the names of a lot of dead Jews as well as living. The Russians census takers were not very careful with their figures. It was the slaughter of the innocents all over again, and no messiah in sight.

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The richest members of the community and the *kahal* got their own sons off, of course. Bribes were rampant, as were forgeries. Boys were reported on the census as much younger than they were; or they were given up for adoption to Jewish families without sons of their own since single sons were never taken. And once in a while, a truly desperate mother would encourage her sons to mutilate themselves, for the army — like kosher butchers — did not accept damaged stock.

In my grandfather's village was a family known popularly as Eight-toes because that is how many each of the five sons had apiece. They'd cut off their little toes to escape the draft.

So many boys were trying in so many ways to avoid conscription that a new and awful profession arose amongst the Jews — the *Khaper*. He was a kidnapper, a bounty hunter, a Jew against Jews.

My Aunt Vera used to sing an old song, but I didn't know what it meant until almost too late:

I had already washed and said the blessing
When the snatcher walked right in.
"Where are you going?" he asks me.
"To buy wheat, to buy corn."
"Oh no," he says, "you are on your way
Trying to escape...."

One of my uncles remarked once that the family had come over to escape the *khapers* in the 1850s, and I thought he said "The coppers." For years I was sure the Yolens were but one step ahead of the police. Given my Uncle Louis's reputation as a bootlegger, why should anyone have wondered at my mistake? But I learned about the *khaper* — the real one — the year I was sixteen. And I understood, for the first time, why my family had left Ykaterinislav without bothering to pack or say goodbye.

I was sixteen in the early sixties, living with my parents and two younger brothers in Westport, Connecticut. My father, a member of a lower-class family, had married rather late in life to a young and lovely Southern Jewish intellectual. He had become — by dint of hard work and much charm — part of the New York advertising fraternity. He had also rather successfully

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shaken off his Jewish identity: of all the Yolens of his generation, he was the only one without a hint of an accent. If he knew Yiddish, he had suppressed or forgotten it. My mother's family were active leftists, more interested in radicalism than religion. I was reminded we were Jews only when we went — infrequently — to a cousin's wedding or bar mitzva.

I was undersized, over-bright, and prone to causes. My glasses hid the fact that I was more myopic about people than things. Recently I had fallen under the spell of a local pacifist guru who was protesting American involvement in Vietnam even before Americans were aware we *were* involved. While my friends were playing football and discussing baseball stats, I was standing in protest lines or standing silently in vigils in the middle of the bridge over the Saugatuck River. I even took to writing poems, full of angst and schoolboy passion. One ended:

> *Death you do not frighten me,*
> *Only the unknown is frightening.*

which the guru's group published in their mimeoed newsletter. It was my first by-line, which my father, a staunch Republican, refused to read.

It was while I was standing next to Bert Koop, the pacifist guru, basking in his praise of my poetry and wishing — not for the first time — that *he* was my father, that I noticed the man in black. We were used to onlookers, who usually shouted something at us, then walked away. But he was different. Wearing a long, ankle-length black coat and high boots with the pants pushed into the tops, he stood in the shadow of the town library's front door. He had an odd cap pulled down to his eyebrows which effectively hid his face, though I could tell he was staring at us. He didn't move for long minutes, and I thought he was watching the entire line of us. It was only much later that I understood he had been staring at me.

"FBI?" I whispered to Bert.

"CIA," he told me. "But remember — we have rights." He turned his face toward the man in black, as if defying him.

I did the same. And then, as bravado took over — sixteen is the high point of bravado even today — I slammed my fist against my chest, shouting across the noise of the traffic: "Doug Yolen. American. I have my rights."

At that the man in black nodded at me, or at least he tucked his chin

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down, which totally obscured his face. I turned to gauge Bert's reaction. He was smiling proudly at me. When I looked back, the man in the doorway was gone.

THE NEXT time I saw him, I was at a basketball game, having been persuaded by Mary Lou Renzetti to go with her. I had had a crush on Mary Lou since second grade, so it didn't take much persuading. She thought of me as her little brother, though we were the same age, give or take a couple of months.

The man was on the other side of the gym, where the Southport crowd sat in dead quiet because their team was losing, and badly. I didn't see him until the second half. He was wearing the same black coat and cap, even though it must have been 100° in the gym. This time, though, it was clear he was staring at me, which gave me the shivers, bravado notwithstanding. So I turned away to look at Mary Lou's profile, with its snubbed nose and freckles. Her mother was Irish and she took after that side.

Jack Patterson made an incredible basket then and we all leaped up to scream our approval. When I sat down again, I glanced at the Southport benches. The man in black was gone.

It went on like that for days. I would see him for a minute and then look away. When I looked back he wasn't there. Sometimes it was clear where he had gone, for a nearby door would just be closing. Other times there was nowhere for him to have disappeared.

At first I found it uncomfortable, spooky. Then when nothing at all happened, I tried to make a joke of it.

"So — you see that guy over there, Mary Lou?" I said. "The one with the black cap?" We were standing outside in the parking lot after school. I gestured over my shoulder at the running track, now covered with new fallen snow. "He's been following me."

She put her hand on my arm, so I enlarged on the story, hoping she'd continue to hold on. "He's probably heard my dad is rich or something and wants to kidnap me. You think my dad will give him anything? I mean after the report card *I* brought home? He'll probably have to send my dad one of my fingers or something to prove he means..."

"Douggie, there's no one there."

I felt her hand on my arm, the fingers tight. I liked how they felt, and

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grinned at her. Slowly I turned my head, careful not to jiggle her hand loose. He wasn't there, of course. The snow on the running track was unbroken.

I thought about saying something to my father then. Or to my mother. But the more I rehearsed what I could say, the sillier it sounded. And though I had made a joke of it with Mary Lou, the truth is that the report I'd brought home the week before hadn't really put me in my parents' good graces. It was "Douggie — you're too bright for this!" from my father. And a searching, soulful look from Mom. To make matters worse, the twins brought home all As. But then so had I at age thirteen.

So I shrugged the whole thing off as nerves. Or glands. Or needing new glasses. Or someone playing a bizarre joke. Or a hallucination. Only I had never joined the drinking crowd at school. Wine gave me headaches and I hated the taste of beer, especially when it repeated up my nose. Drugs had yet to hit high school — or at least to hit our crowd. They filtered in slowly over the next few years so that by the time the twins were seniors, Todd had experimented with everything in sight, and Tim joined an anti-drug crusade. But that's another story entirely.

Finally I spoke with Bert Koop about it and he was, predictably, sympathetic. And — as it turns out — totally wrong.

"Definitely CIA," he said. "They've been bugging my phone, too. Probably going to try and get to me through you."

"Well, if they think going to war is brave," I said. "I'll show them what *real* courage is. I won't say a word."

"Death..." Bert quoted, "you do not frighten me."

"Right," I said, and really meant it. After all, I had never actually seen anyone dead. Jews don't believe in open caskets. So death *didn't* frighten me. But the man in black was beginning to.

It was about a week after I first saw him that the man in black turned up at our house. Not *in* the house, but *at* it, walking slowly down the road. Grounded on week days till my grades improved, I had been working on my homework curled up on the sofa in the living room. I was pretty involved in writing a term paper on *War and Peace.* Tolstoy had been a pacifist, too, and I was writing about the difference between a war in fiction and a war in real life, especially Vietnam. I don't know what made me look up at that moment,

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but I did. And through the picture window I saw him walking along Newtown Turnpike toward the Weston line.

I leaped off the sofa, scattering my notes and the AFSC pamphlets about war resistance all over the floor. Sticking my feet quickly into boots and, without lacing them, I ran out the door after him. By the time I got down the driveway and to the main road, I was shivering uncontrollably. It was late November and we'd already had two snowfalls; I hadn't taken a coat. But I walked way past the Hartleys' house, at least a quarter mile on up the road, right to the Weston line.

There was no sign of him.

That night I came down with a raging fever; missed a whole week of school, an interfaith peace vigil I had helped put together, the start of the big basketball tournament, and the due date for my Tolstoy paper. Evidently I had also spent one whole day — twenty-four solid hours — ranting and raving about the man in black. Enough so that both my mother *and* my father were worried. They had called the town cops, who questioned my friends, including Mary Lou. A police car made special rounds the entire week by our house. It seems my father really *did* have a lot of money, and there had been a kidnapping just six weeks earlier of an adman's kid in Darien. No one was dismissing it as a prank.

But then they found the gang that had kidnapped the Darien kid, she identified them all, and the special patrols stopped. And once I was well again, I swore it had all been some kind of wild nightmare, a dream. After all, I had a healthy distrust of the police because of my association with Bert Koop. I think everyone was relived.

Except — and this was the really funny thing — except my father. He made these long, secret phone calls to his brothers and sisters, and even to his Uncle Louis, who scarcely had an aggie left, much less the rest of his marbles. My father rarely spoke to his family; they were the embarrassing past he'd left behind. But since my night of raving, he insisted on calling them every night, talking to them in Yiddish. *Yiddish!* After that, he started going to work late and driving the twins and me to school before getting on the train to the city. Further, he established a check-in system for all of us. I was sixteen and embarrassed; sixteen is the high-water level of being embarrassed by one's parents.

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It was two weeks before I saw the man in black again. By that time, with my grounding rescinded — not because my grades had gone up but because we all had other things to think about — and Mary Lou starting to pay a different kind of attention to me, I had all but forgotten the man in black. Or at least I had forgotten he scared me. I had walked the long block to Mary Lou's for a study date. Study on her part, date on mine, but I still got to hold her hand for about a quarter of an hour without her finding an excuse to remove it. Her parents had kicked me out at ten.

The moon was that yellow-white of old bone. It made odd shadows on the snow. As I walked my breath spun out before me like sugar candy; except for the noise of my exhalations, there wasn't a sound at all.

I was thinking about Mary Lou and the feel of her hand, warm and a bit moist in mine, and letting my feet get me home. Since I had gone around that block practically every day since second grade — the school bus stop was in front of Mary Lou's driveway — I didn't need to concentrate where I was going. And suddenly, right at the bend of the road, where Newtown Turnpike meets Mary Lou's road, a large shadow detached itself from one of the trees. He had made no sound but somehow I had heard something. I looked up and there he was. Something long and sharp glittered in his hand. He was humming a snatch of song and it came to me across the still air, tantalizingly familiar. I couldn't quite place it, though a line ran through my mind: "You are on your way trying to escape..."

I turned and ran. How I ran, back past Mary Lou's, past the Pattersons, past the new row of houses that just barely met the two acre standards. I turned left and right and left again. It was dark — the moon having gotten hidden behind clouds — then light once more and still I ran. I had no breath and I ran; I had a stitch in my side and I ran; I stood for a moment by the side of the road vomiting and vomiting up something and then nothing and I ran.

I got home at three a.m. My mother lay fast asleep on the sofa, a box of Kleenex by her side, her eyes red with crying. She didn't rouse when I slipped in the door. I thought of waking her, of hugging her with gratitude that I was home and safe. But I was so exhausted, I went right to bed.

I took off my shoes and, still in my clothes, lay down. A shadow detached itself from my closet. Something long and sharp glittered in its hand. I tried to scream and couldn't, then saw it was my father and relaxed.

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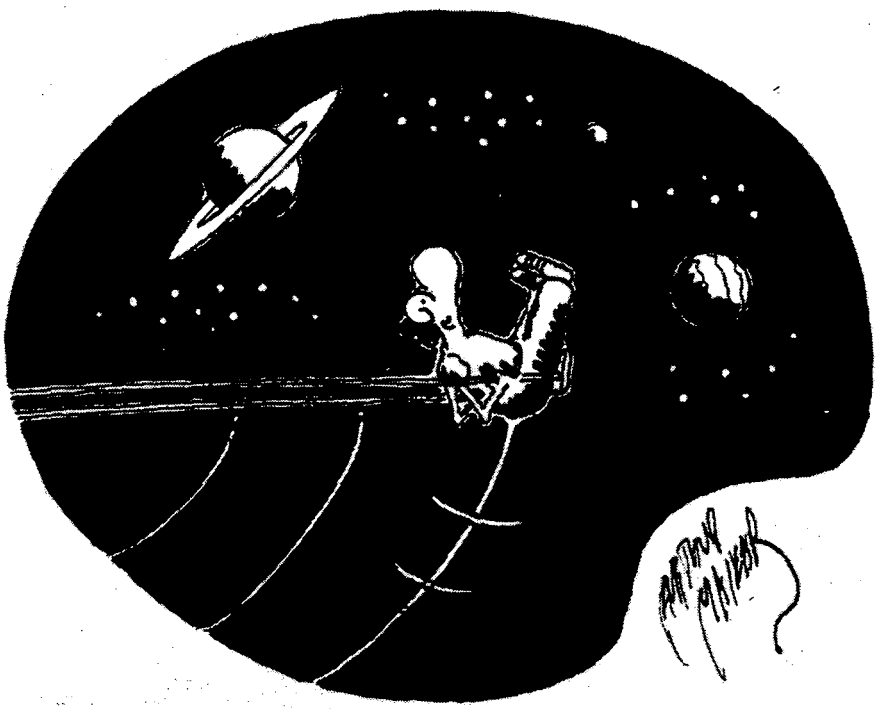
"Dad..." I began.

"This..." he said as he always did when he was going to punish me, "is going to hurt me more than it does you."

He was wrong of course. On cold nights, especially winter nights, that missing toe aches more than anything.

But I have never seen the man in black again.



"Higher! Higher!"

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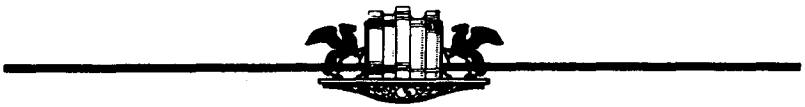

Books To Look For

ORSON SCOTT CARD

Bradley Denton, *Blackburn*, (St. Martin's, Feb92, cloth, 296pp, $19.95)

READERS OF this magazine will not be surprised to know that lighthearted sf writer Bradley Denton's latest novel is neither lighthearted nor science fiction: After all, a part of the book appeared in these pages as a definitely darkhearted story. But the way I see it, if the esteemed editor can publish a part of this mainstream book in *F&SF*, then I can review it here, too! And I want to point out this book to you because Denton is one of the best writers our field has yet produced and as he makes his way through whatever genre strikes his fancy (for he can clearly handle any of them), he is going to do us proud. Unlike some other writers who shall remain nameless, Denton seems secure enough in his talent to feel no need to repudiate his science fiction roots. In short, he's still going to remember us smalltown folks when he hits the big time.

Which may well happen with this book. *Blackburn* is a comedy, make no mistake. But you'll be hard pressed to find a blacker, more savage comedy than this one. The eponymous hero, raised by an abusive father and cursed with a perhaps overly keen sense of justice, quite accidentally begins a picaresque journey through America, finding people who are doing really nasty unkind things to others, and, when he deems it appropriate, he kills them.

We're not talking about Charles Bronson movies here, either. He isn't going after the stock anti-social villains like drug dealers. No, Blackburn watches as a couple of garage mechanics deliberately steal from a trusting old woman and, as a part of setting things right, involves them rather intimately with their heavy machinery. Blackburn spots a fascinating pro-life demonstrator who goes a bit too far in her effort to combat the evil in the world, and sets things up so her own violence destroys her. When

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Blackburn, broke and hungry, crashes a wedding party in order to load up on the free food, he happens to find the groom boffing an old girlfriend in the men's room of the church, and Blackburn finds a colorful and entertaining way of saving the bride from a marriage she would surely have regretted.

Through all these adventures, leading up to Blackburn's final confrontation with his father and ending with his death, Denton never once muddies the moral lines of this story. Blackburn is not a hero, not even in his own eyes. He's doing what he's doing, but he doesn't pretend it's a noble quest. And yet it is impossible for us not to like Blackburn, even as we are relieved to know that he is fictional. After all, which of us has not, at some time or another, behaved like (to use Jane Yolen's term) a "tush flambé"? Aren't we glad none of the other people present had guns?

No mistake — Denton is a compulsively readable writer, and *Blackburn* is a page-turner. At the end of it, you may have to spend some time in scrupulous self-examination, trying to figure out what it says about you that you read the *whole book* and were fascinated by every page of it. That's nothing — think of what I learn about myself from the fact that I am also recommending this book to you.

Robert Grudin, *Book*, (Random House, 1992, cloth, 251pp, $19); Robert Grudin, *The Grace of Great Things: Creativity and Innovation*, (Houghton-Mifflin, 1990, trade paper, 243pp, $9.95)

I once was proud of myself for having thought of titling a novel *Damn Fine Novel*. But Grudin one-upped us all by calling his book *Book*. Yet it is not a mere bit of cleverness, the sort of disdainful self-dismissal one would expect from a writer who is trying desperately to convince us that he is so cool he doesn't actually care much for his own fiction. Grudin cares, and *Book* is titled as it is because no other title would do.

Despite its slimness, *Book* is many things, a whole list of things. First, it is a murder mystery, and a first-rate one at that. Someone has apparently killed a college professor whose forgotten first novel is on the verge of rediscovery, and whose second novel someone found threatening indeed.

Second, *Book* is a delicious satire on the excesses of critical theorists in the English departments of American universities. If you have

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ever wanted to watch the cell-by-cell deconstruction of a deconstructionist, *Book* will satisfy you completely. The more you know about literary theory, the more fun you'll have with this aspect of the novel; but even if you know and care nothing about trendy critical theories, you'll still enjoy the book. When you come to passages that seem utterly incomprehensible, simply recognize that, upon careful decoding, they are *still* worthless, and that is the author's point. Take it as a given and go on.

Third, *Book* is a serious exploration of a lot of serious matters in human life — love, the relationship between the sexes, the role of literature in life, and a lot more. Grudin is a thoughtful and perceptive writer, but more important, he is alive in his own fiction: While the issues he explores consciously are well-illuminated and worth thinking about, there are also issues that he unconsciously explores and which are even more powerful and effective because of that. This is *not* one of those literary novels that is so artfully planned that it has become a robot of a book, with no soul inside it to discover. Grudin does not write prekilled fiction.

Fourth, even as *Book* pokes a bit of fun at experimental and overallusive fiction, it is itself both experimental and allusive. If *Book* were a mere collection of pastiche, Grudin would be the literary equivalent of Rich Little. Nevertheless, where Grudin does put on someone else's style, he does it masterfully. And where he plays with form and voice and reality, he is more likely than not to bring it off so skillfully that most of the time you aren't even aware that the author is experimenting.

Fifth, there's enough fantasy in this book to qualify it for review in this column without apology.

A lot of books are called extraordinary, and there's a sense in which *all* books are extraordinary, so that the term begins to become meaningless. So let me explain that if you were sitting across from me right now, you would hear something in my tone of voice when I say, "This novel is *extraordinary,*" that would make you think, "You know, I might give that one a try." Pretend we had that conversation, and act accordingly.

Having been so impressed with *Book,* I also picked up a copy of Grudin's *The Grace of Great Things.* Normally I'm impatient with books that wax mystical and romantic about creativity, as if it were some magical gift that only a few people are en-

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dowed with. Well, Grudin does have just a touch of that awe, but most of the time *Grace of Great Things* is practical. In fact, downright *useful*. And where most books on this sort of topic use a lot of words to say very little (but with passion!), Grudin uses very few words to say a lot. Every sentence contains new information. *Grace* cannot be read quickly. And there's no point in underlining as you read. You'll just end up with a continuous line drawn under every sentence.

If there's a flaw, it's that Grudin does seem to think that people who have been or still are in universities are more likely to be creative than people who have not; I suspect that he has this opinion because he has been too long at the university himself. In my experience, the creatively dead occupy as large a proportion of people in the professions as they do of people in the trades. But it's easy enough to mentally elide those places where Grudin seems to assume that creativity is more readily found in intellectually lofty places; it does not diminish the value of a deeply perceptive and fresh analysis.

Read Grudin. His is a marvelous voice, saying truthful and important things, and you owe it to yourself to hear him out.

Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, (UK, HarperCollins/Flamingo, 1967, repr. 1992, trade paper, 206pp, £4.99)

This book has been around for a while, and one can't help but think that someone in the Monty Python troupe must have read it. But this is not to say that *The Third Policeman* should be taken for laughs. On the contrary, from the murder that begins the story to the revelation of what has *really* been going on at the end, this book is funny in the way that *Alice in Wonderland* and *Ulysses* and *Waiting for Godot* are funny. You may laugh, but always in the back of your mind you will be saying, This is very strange; and even farther back in your mind, perhaps so far back that it isn't your own mind anymore at all, there will be another voice saying, What if this is true?

The first-person narrator has killed a man. He did it for money, and he had an accomplice. In fact, it was the accomplice's idea, and it was the accomplice who actually got the money and managed to hide it somewhere. So the narrator simply stays with his accomplice day and night, so that he cannot possibly skip out with the cash. Eventually, though, they do get separated — and that's where the deep strangeness begins.

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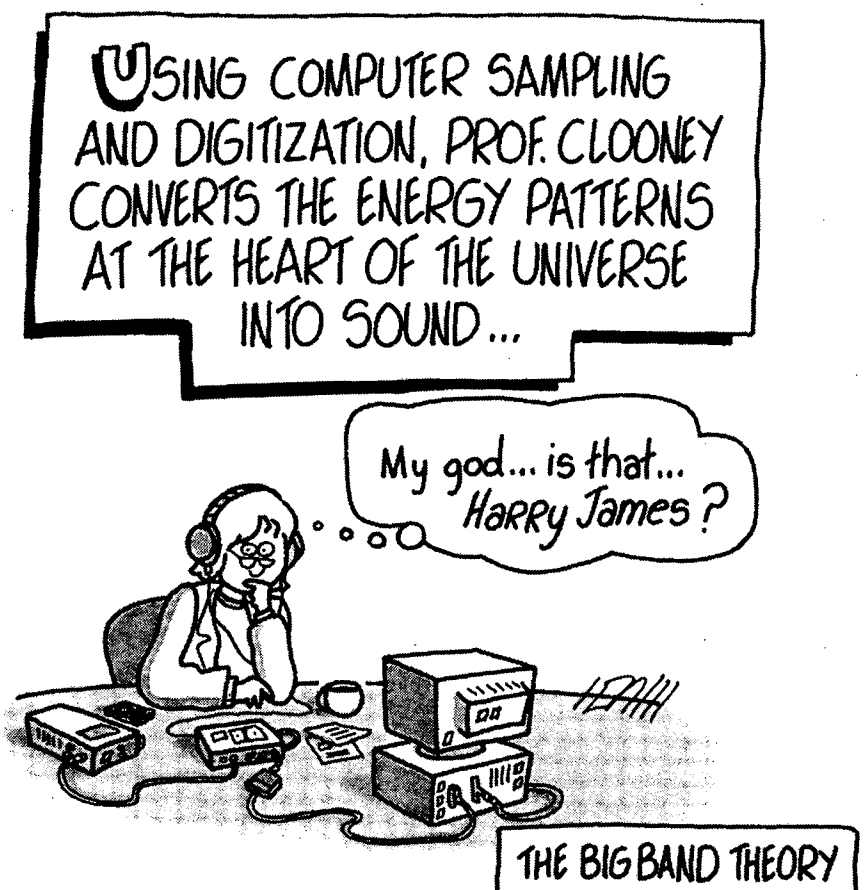
I will describe it no further. This book was urged on me by several readers and writers when I was in Dublin recently; they take great pride in the fact that this book was written by one of their own and reflects their culture, their language, and their deeply twisted view of the world. Well, so would I, had I the fortune to be Irish.


USING COMPUTER SAMPLING AND DIGITIZATION, PROF. CLOONEY CONVERTS THE ENERGY PATTERNS AT THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSE INTO SOUND...
My god... is that... Harry James?
THE BIG BAND THEORY

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Bridget McKenna's most recent appearance in F&SF was in our March issue, with her moving fantasy story, "The Good Pup." This time, she provides the inspiration for Thomas Canty's lovely cover with a humorous and chilling tale of a singular infestation.

The Little Things

By Bridget McKenna

IT STARTED OUT IN A SMALL way early one evening, almost like some sort of divine visitation. They came in twos and threes and half-dozens, flying above the main street of town on some unknown and unimaginable errand; perhaps twice the size of large butterflies, with pale, slender bodies and dragonfly wings sparkling in the sun. The children noticed them first, and followed them down the street, looking up in wonder.

"Fairies!" they shouted to their parents inside the cozy houses. "Fairies!" they shrieked to one another in high voices. "Fairies!" Finally the grownups came out to see.

"Have you ever seen so many in one place?" asked Mr. Finchley, who was old enough to remember them from his childhood.

"I don't think I've ever seen a live one at all," replied Mrs. Samuelson, and her eyes filled up with tears.

"They're so beautiful!" said some. "So delicate!" said others. "It's as though they came from another world."

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In fact, they had come from the fairy preserve only ninety or so miles to the north, but visitors were not allowed on the preserve, and since fairies could not live in captivity and were protected by stringent government regulations, most of the people of Morgan's Glen had never seen one except in picture-books. Some of them gazed aloft in amazement while others hurried inside for cameras to record the impossible moment.

From her ancient porch swing, Miranda Morgan watched the townspeople bumbling about on the street in front of her house. "We told them there'd be a fairy problem," she muttered, picking up her cane. "Daddy tried to tell them about the damned things, but who'd listen?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Morgan?" Martin Price, Miss Morgan's gardener, had his back to the commotion on the street as he arranged bedding plants into a border under the boxwood. "Did you say something?"

"They weren't always endangered, you know," the old woman told him. She rose from the swing and went inside, shaking her head.

"What wasn't?" asked Martin. He got up and turned toward the street and the excitement, brushing dark moist soil from his trousers. Halfway to standing straight he halted, frozen. A tiny creature no longer than his little finger was hovering in the air a foot from his face.

It had a slight, almost sexless body and a pouf of golden hair like thistledown that fluttered in the breeze of its crystalline wings. When he gasped, it started back a few inches and blinked luminous green eyes, like those of a bottle-fly, but its face remained as void of expression as a doll's.

Three more of its kind flew near, and it flitted after them. Now as Martin straightened slowly and looked out over the nearby street, he saw Miss Morgan's neighbors gaping in much the same way he imagined he had been, clicking cameras and reaching out for just one feel of a fluttering wing.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Martin exclaimed, crossing himself hastily. He could see six or eight fairies scattered about the yard; perching on the fence, dipping into the birdbath, baiting the cat. The cat! Martin sprinted across the lawn to the scene of imminent disaster. Disraeli, Miss Morgan's enormous mackerel tabby, was hugging the ground, tail twitching spasmodically. His intended prey flitted a foot in front of his eyes. Martin dove at the cat and captured him in his arms. The fairy flew straight upward.

The cat shoved off from Martin's chest and stomach to follow the fairy's trajectory, leaving eight long scratches welling blood through Martin's shirt.

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Martin groaned and rolled over; the fairy had escaped Disraeli, who was looking back and forth between it and Martin with ears laid flat.

Martin picked himself up and walked backward toward the house, staring at the little dancers in the air. He was certain he had never seen anything so beautiful.

The house was abuzz with it. Cook and Willamena, duties forgotten for the moment, could scarcely speak of anything else. Miss Morgan showed Martin a painting that hung in an upstairs bedroom, depicting the local countryside perhaps a century before, dotted here and there with fairies. She had seen one when she was a girl.

"They were almost gone, even that long ago," she told him, gazing up at the old landscape. "I recall Edna Moseley, my best friend, caught one in a jar when we were six or seven. She poked holes in the lid, and put in ever so many different kinds of flowers and fruit, but it sickened and died in a day. We wondered if it were the last, but of course it wasn't."

"It looks so different," Martin said. "Without the town here, I mean. So beautiful."

Miss Morgan gazed at the painting as though it were not merely canvas and pigment, but a memory that caused her a certain amount of pain. "It was my own private world," she said.

Afraid to go outside, Cook and Willamena had watched through an upper floor window until dark, oohing and aahing at the antics of the Lilliputian fliers outside. Now, after Miss Morgan had drunk her sherry and gone to bed, they sat with Martin in the kitchen over a pot of tea and talked of fairies.

"I was certain I'd heard they were extinct," said Cook. "It was in the papers, oh, 'way back when." She put a plate of shortbread biscuits on the kitchen table.

"Not extinct," offered Willamena, choosing a biscuit, "Preserved."

"The government put them on a *preserve* in order to keep them from *going* extinct," Martin explained, putting sugar in his tea. "They were dying off from pollution and being driven out of their habitat by development and agriculture. They say there were only a few hundred left alive when they established the preserve."

"Well, they must all be in Morgan's Glen tonight," mused Cook, "and no doubt they'll all be gone by morning."

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Not only were the fairies not gone by morning, but their numbers had undergone a rather spectacular increase. If there were a few dozen of them at most when dark fell the evening before, there were a few *hundred* dozen now. Martin locked Disraeli in the garage, too late to save several fairies whose wings he found discarded under the old tom's favorite boxwood. As he went about his work he found he must shield his face and still manage to watch his feet, for the little things were constantly underfoot.

As the morning wore on, Martin caught himself stopping in the midst of his tasks to watch the fairies perform their aerobatics or observe one perched in perfect fluttering balance on the tip of a leaf. There must be two sexes, he thought, but it was not easy to tell; there were more similarities than differences about them. He wondered if they would stay.

About noon, Miss Morgan asked him to drive Willamena to do the household shopping. Driving, however, proved impossible with the road crowded with fairies, and Martin reluctant to take a chance on crushing any of them. He volunteered to walk the list into town and bring back the day's supplies.

Morgan's Glen was in a state of confusion and disarray. Most people were shut up in their houses, fearing to step out and injure one of the tiny creatures. Those whose business took them outside clutched umbrellas or newspapers to guard their heads as they sidestepped over clots of fairies which had come to rest on the sidewalks.

Martin walked as carefully as any of them, trying to avoid giving injury and still study the exquisite beauty of the ethereal visitors. It took him fully thirty-five minutes to walk the half-mile to Mr. Pennyford's Grocery, and when he arrived he was exhausted from the effort.

He opened the door carefully, so as not to admit anything that didn't belong. Mr. Pennyford stood, hands on meaty hips, regarding the scene outside his window. "So what do you make of all this, Martin?" he asked.

"Well, they're quite breathtaking, aren't they?" Martin replied, gazing at the fairies from the safety of the store window. "Who'd have guessed we'd actually have a chance to see real ones in our lifetime?"

"I've seen all *I* care to, thank you. Bad for trade and bad for traffic." Mr. Pennyford turned around and took Martin's list. "I wish somebody'd do something about it."

"Well, they *are* protected by law," Martin noted.

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"Yes. On account of there not being very goddamned many of them." Mr. Pennyford gestured at the street outside. "They don't look so bloody uncommon from here, do they?" The storekeeper walked up and down the aisles pulling items from the shelves and handing them to Martin.

"I called the Fish and Game this morning and told them their birds had flown," Mr. Pennyford continued. He scrutinized two brands of pickled herring, chose one and handed it over. "The lady said they'd already logged a dozen calls this morning and they'll assign someone to the problem as soon as they wrap up some preliminary paperwork; forms and the like."

"Then I suppose that means there'll be someone official here today, looking into things."

Mr. Pennyford snorted. "Not judging from *my* experience with the government!"

"Well, there are worse things out there, or were," Martin noted. "At least it's only fairies."

The bell above the door chimed and Joey Stanleigh squeezed in. "Nice weather we're havin'," he remarked with a grin. "Fair, with scattered fairies."

"Bloody nuisance," said Mr. Pennyford, picking out asparagus spears from a crate and wrapping them with a rubber band. "You've come to pick up my radio, then?" He pointed to a shelf.

Joey picked up the radio and peered into the back of it. "I'll have it back to you in a day or two. So what's new, besides the obvious?"

"It's hard to give much thought to anything else, isn't it?" said Martin. "It's getting hard to go about one's business with them about. You'd think there'd be some sort of natural repellent, wouldn't you? Citronella, or something like that?"

"Yeah," said Joey, "what did they use before, when they were all around the countryside?"

"Oh, there might be some people around old enough to remember what folks used to do to keep them away at picnics," said Mr. Pennyford. "But this is a bit tougher problem, and it's going to call for a tougher solution."

"Perhaps," said Martin. "But I still think natural ways are the best. For instance, I don't use any insecticides on the garden. It's much better for the plants if you use the insects' natural enemies — ladybugs for aphids and praying mantis for just about everything else. What do you suppose eats fairies?"

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"Well, the birds are picking off a few, but barring a miraculous flock of seagulls, I don't see birds as the answer. Now Joey here's a handyman, isn't he? Why don't you put your brain to work on the problem, Joey?"

"Perhaps I will," mused Joey. "Perhaps I just will."

Martin signed for the groceries, picked up his bags and began the wearying walk home, pausing frequently to watch lovely pale forms hovering and swooping like hummingbirds, inches in front of his face.

There were more fairies in Morgan's Glen in the afternoon than there had been in the morning, and they seemed to have absolutely no sense of their own mortality, as if the loss of one, or even a thousand, could not affect the whole. They dotted the streets in parallel rows where automobile tires had flattened them into the pavement, and lay in heaps beneath walls into which they had flown unaware or uncaring. Dogs and cats pursued them with abandon, and were locked up by their horrified owners as a humane expedient. At the school, recess was canceled and the children sulked inside, watching fairies dance and flitter in the sky and listening to the splat of tiny bodies against the windowpane.

MARTIN ARRIVED home to find Willamena, armed with a corn broom, hanging over the banister and batting at a fairy that had gotten into the parlor. "Don't kill it!" he shouted. "I'll get a net!" He ran to the shed and dug out a cobweb-shrouded fishing net, unused since the days of Francis Morgan, Miss Morgan's late father.

He chased the fairy around the parlor and entry hall until, exhausted, it lighted on a kentia palm. When he dropped the net over the palm frond, the fairy bolted into the end of it and Martin secured the opening with his free hand.

"Look out!" Willamena screeched. "It might bite!"

"I don't think so," Martin said. He held the net up and examined the dainty captive.

The fairy gripped the mesh of the net in two minuscule fists. Its eyes, beautiful and vacuous, looked back at him with utter lack of interest.

Martin stepped out the front door, and Willamena shut it smartly behind him. He shook the fairy gently out of the net. It stumbled in midair for a moment, then righted itself and darted away.

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Someone had let Disraeli out of the garage, Martin noted, and he was lying on his side under the boxwood in a heap of cellophane wings, his stomach bulging and his breathing labored. Martin lamented the fairies' deaths, but he could scarcely save them all.

There was a creaking sound from above as Miss Morgan's window cranked open a few inches. Martin looked up to see her fending off diminutive bodies with a flyswatter. "Goddamned little monsters! Martin, will you come up here, please?"

"Right away, Miss Morgan," he replied, and squeezed himself inside.

"And bring two glasses of sherry!"

Martin went down to the kitchen, where Cook was stirring a pot of soup — cream of leek by the scent, which wafted richly on the air. He opened the pantry door and turned on the light, searching through the shelves for one of the dusty bottles of Spanish sherry that were a treasured legacy from Miss Morgan's father.

"Do we still have some of Miss Morgan's good sherry in the pantry?" he asked.

"God, I hope so," said Cook. "She won't bring up but one bottle at a time, and she won't let anyone else go down in the cellar. Keeps a key hidden somewhere."

Just as Martin found the sherry he heard a shriek behind him. He turned to see Cook, her mouth still open in mid-ululation. She was holding up a parboiled fairy — wings pasted to its back with soup — by one tiny foot. The shriek modulated to a wail, then ebbed to a low moan.

Martin set the bottle down hastily and dashed for Cook just as her eyes rolled back in her head. She collapsed against him, and he set her gently on the floor, fanning her with a muffin tin snatched from the countertop. After a few moments she awoke with a start and flung the gooey fairy against the wall where it stuck, arms and legs outstretched. Martin helped her to a chair.

Willamena came in. "Mrs. Samuelson called. There's an emergency meeting of the Community Council tomorrow night. They're going to discuss the fairy problem. Whatever happened to *you?*" This to Cook, who was still noticeably pale and slack of jaw.

Martin pointed at the wall, handed Willamena the muffin tin and retrieved the sherry bottle. He took two glasses from a cupboard by the door and went upstairs. Miss Morgan's ancestors had lived hereabouts for

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generations — perhaps she could be of some help in the present crisis.

"I know what you're thinking," Miss Morgan said as Martin poured her a sherry. "It's a bit early in the day to start hitting the bottle. Well, what the hell else have I got to do, with these miniature monstrosities taking over the whole town? I can't take a walk, and I can't sit out on the porch, and I'm getting more than a bit cranky about the whole thing. Don't forget to pour one for yourself."

"They were a problem before, weren't they? The fairies, I mean," Martin said, taking Miss Morgan's advice about the sherry. "You said your father warned someone about them."

"Yes. The development company who dreamed up this whole Morgan's Glen idea and bought most of Daddy's land when we fell on hard times, that's who he warned. He told them they would be building in a migratory path, but they weren't in the slightest worried about being overrun by a nearly extinct fairy population." She drained her glass and held it out for a refill.

"So this *has* happened before?"

"Well, not for a long time. There weren't very many left even when Daddy was a boy, but his father could remember a time; and *his* father. Every so often they'd overpopulate an area and swarm, especially after their natural predators began dying off. It would be a bother for a time, but the Morgans had their own way of dealing with fairy swarms."

"You mean some sort of repellent? Or a control of some kind?"

"Yes," Miss Morgan replied, guarded. "But it's a Morgan family secret." She poured herself a third sherry and topped off Martin's glass. "The Morgans have been charged with a sort of...obligation," she said, looking up at Martin to see if he understood. He did not.

"My great-great-grandfather, Arthur Morgan, was a farmer in this county," Miss Morgan continued. "It was mostly woods around here until his day, when the government put a few thousand acres up for sale and the trees were all cut down for farms. No one knew, then, about the migrations.

"The fairies stayed away for the most part, and anything that carried away chickens was shot on sight, so the natural predators — the sorts of things that kept the fairies' numbers down — were almost exterminated. The next time the fairies swarmed, the farms were overrun."

"What did the farmers do?"

"They sold out."

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"To Arthur Morgan?"

"Yes. He'd put away quite a bit of money, and they were willing to take anything at all just to get away from the fairies. They were everywhere, you see — a solid blanket of fairy bodies as far as the eye could see."

"So Arthur ended up owning it all, did he?"

"Everything you can see in any direction from here and more. And he passed it through his children's children, and with it he passed a burden — a solemn responsibility."

"Responsibility?"

"There was never another fairy swarm that lasted more than two days from that time to this."

"Because of the repellent, or whatever it is?" Martin hastened to refill Miss Morgan's glass.

"Yes, the secret. Daddy passed it along to me; I was his only surviving child. But after he was forced to sell, he told me it was not to be used again. Not for them." She gestured outside at the streets and buildings that had replaced her private girlhood universe. "Not for the thieving developers who took our land to build their little houses and their little stores and their little schools. They were too eager to grab up the land for a pittance, and too impatient to turn it into something it was never meant to be."

Martin put down his sherry and knelt beside Miss Morgan. "But the developers aren't the people who live here now. And it's the people who live here who are suffering. Won't you reconsider for their sakes?"

She patted Martin's hand. "The fairies will go away eventually. They always do."

"Yes, but when, exactly?"

Miss Morgan sipped her sherry and looked smug and not a little tipsy. "It could be days. Or weeks."

By the next day, it was impossible to go out of doors without batting away swarms of fairies. People knocked them out of the air with newspapers, stepped on crunchy piles of them as they walked, drove over streets paved with fairy corpses. Birds caught and ate them by the thousands without making a noticeable dent in their numbers.

The town pets, released from captivity as an extermination measure, were so surfeited with fairy meat that they could only lie about and watch the

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survivors with eyes glazed over. The children, at loose ends now that the schools had been closed for the duration of the emergency, had lost their initial wonderment and were batting fairies out of the air with badminton rackets while parents pretended not to notice. Several churches held prayer meetings, to no apparent avail.

There appeared to be millions of fairies now, and they had no more regard for their lives or their surroundings than might a swarm of bees. They massed on trees and flowers and shrubbery like locusts, and when they rose up, nothing green remained. Any exposed foodstuffs, from backyard vegetables to pet biscuits, were fair game. Martin looked out on the ruins of his garden and wondered if anything at all could be saved.

An altogether different and more delicate problem was that of excrement. It was accumulating on rooftops, streets, and sidewalks, adding the insult of a thoroughly disagreeable odor to the injury of the fairy onslaught. The Health Department was called about this complication, but they reported that they were unable to proceed until the Fish and Game had completed their investigation and ruled on the environmental impact of Health Department intervention. It was clear that the meeting had not been called a day too soon.

The meeting hall was packed with townspeople and not entirely devoid of fairies, forty or so of which flittered about the heads of the assembled, oblivious to being slapped down and trampled on.

"We have been in contact with the Fish and Game," announced the head of the Council after he had called the meeting to order. "They have promised to send a representative to investigate the problem as soon as certain preliminary work has been done on the case. It seems there was some sort of mix-up with some paperwork, and the preserve has been unattended for more than a year." He scanned his notes. "Very nearly two years, actually. The Fish and Game have also promised to assign a new person to the preserve as soon as the investigation has been completed." He looked up apologetically from his report as the townspeoples' grumbles began to drown him out.

"What are they investigating, then?" Mr. Pennyford wanted to know. "Whether we've got a million pygmy thugs taking over our town? We could tell them that, I think!" The hall resounded with his neighbors' approbation.

The council leader rapped his gavel again to regain their attention. "Remember, please, that although this is all a terrible inconvenience, we're

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in no actual danger here. There are no documented cases of fairies ever harming a human being."

"It all depends on what you mean by harm," said Mrs. Samuelson, after standing to be heard. "Businesses have barred their doors. The schools are shut down. There's not a green, growing thing left standing anywhere."

"And let's not forget the hygienic problem," added Mr. Finchley. "You can't step outside without being bombarded by fairy droppings. We've become prisoners in our own homes!"

"Not for long, we're not!" Everyone turned to discover the source of the loud voice from the back of the hall.

Joey Stanleigh strode through the crowd with some difficulty, weighted down by cobbled-together hardware strapped haphazardly to his body, and wielding an unfriendly looking hose and nozzle which originated from a large tank on his back. "I've assembled my own extermination device," Joey declared, "and by this time tomorrow I'll have rid Morgan's Glen of our little infestation, right enough."

He aimed the hose at the ceiling and depressed a switch. A twelve-foot flame emerged from the nozzle end with a low roar and fried the fifteen or so nearest fairies in its path. The people gasped and fell back as the cindered fairies fell to the floor, still smoking.

The ensuing moment of silence was broken by a burst of enthusiastic applause from the crowd, which was in turn interrupted by the pounding of the council leader's gavel.

"That is *not* an acceptable solution to our problem, Mr. Stanleigh," the council leader declared.

"Well, let's just discuss this a moment," said one of the other council members. "Mr. Stanleigh's device might be just what's called for in such a critical situation as this. I don't think we can deny its efficacy."

"Whatever we consider," said another, "we must be certain that we operate totally within the law, and the law is on the side of the fairies."

"This council will not consider any plans which include willful destruction of an endangered species," said the council leader, and the other council members, save the one, nodded assent.

"Endangered species my ass," muttered Joey. "I'm going to go out and kill the little bastards!"

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The meeting had accomplished nothing, other than to get Joey's equipment confiscated by the Community Council before he could begin any wholesale fairy-toasting. Other suggestions that were turned down included nets, insecticides, additional prayer meetings, and enough electrified fencing to surround the entire town.

The fairies weren't going away, and the Fish and Game weren't doing anything about it, and the council's hands were tied by the law. It might be, many people agreed, the death of Morgan's Glen. Martin tiptoed home in the gathering dark, wishing there were something he could do to help, and trying not to mind the crackling and crunching under his feet.

The light over the back door had gone out, and Martin stood a moment trying to puzzle out the proper key with his fingers. A sound on his right made him turn; it was Miss Morgan poking about the cellar doors. He ducked deeper into shadow and watched.

Miss Morgan rattled a key in the rusty old lock that closed the cellar doors and cursed roundly until the lock surrendered with a screech and popped open. She pulled back one of the doors and descended the stairs, switching on a lantern to light her way down. Martin choked down his guilt and followed, as did a number of fairies who happened to be in the vicinity of the open door.

Miss Morgan walked to the rear of the cellar and lifted a heavy bar that lay across a smaller door set into the back wall. The door opened upon a sort of pantry whose shelves were stacked with wooden crates. The fairies that had been hovering overhead turned as one and bolted for the open cellar door behind them.

Only blackness was visible between the slats, even when Miss Morgan shone the lantern directly on the crates. There was a musty odor, too, like something left too long in a bottom cupboard. "Hello, my dear ones," she cooed to the crates, "there's a feast out there for you, if only you knew." She patted something between the slats. "Well, it won't be me that wakes you," she said. "Let them suffocate in fairy shit — maybe they'll go away and leave like they did before." She sighed deeply. "Maybe they'll all just go away."

Martin backed away and tiptoed up the steps and outside. He waited a few minutes more at the side of the house, and Miss Morgan came up the cellar stairs with a bottle of sherry under one arm and closed the door. When she had finished wrestling with the old lock, she lifted up a paving stone and

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placed the key underneath.

Martin went to his room and lay awake thinking about what was in the cellar pantry and wondering what he would do if he had the power to change things. How important was the Morgan family secret, whatever it might be, next to the suffering of his friends and neighbors? What would happen if he found the courage to take matters into his own hands? His mind refused to encompass all the possibilities, and as for some of the worst ones, he was just as happy to let it.

He watched the sky lighten by degrees outside his window.

"WHAT *DO* you suppose eats fairies?" Martin mused once again, this time over breakfast in the kitchen. Outside, heaps of fairy bodies blocked the morning light from the high kitchen window, and Cook had switched on the electric bulb.

"Whatever it is, I wish we had a few," said Willamena glumly, heaping a plate with scones.

"And what if we did?" said Martin. "What if we could lay our hands on something that might devour the entire problem for us, only it didn't exactly belong to us?"

"How not exactly is that, exactly?" inquired the Cook.

For perhaps the hundredth time, Martin weighed the alternatives in his mind. "They're in the cellar," he said.

Martin lifted the bar away and pulled open the door. Cook and Willamena stepped forward and peered into the gloom of the pantry. "It's crates," observed Willamena.

"Melon crates," amended Cook.

"Well, it's not melons inside," Martin assured them, pulling one of the crates closer. He strained his eyes against the darkness, but couldn't make out what lay behind the slats. "Did anyone bring a light?"

Willamena pushed one of the cellar doors open, and the morning sun overflowed the doorway. It spilled down the steps and across the cellar floor and into the pantry, where a shaft of it found its way between the slats of a crate.

Something stirred.

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Blackness fluttered and throbbed. The slats creaked and bulged.

"Should we let it out?" Cook wondered, edging back a few steps.

"Now that it's awake, I don't think we have a choice," said Martin. He looked around and found a rusty prybar on the pantry floor, with which he proceeded to force the top slats; the nails screeched loose and a black hand with long webbed fingers pushed the lid up. A yellow eye opened and blinked a crusty black lid. They all jumped back, gasping, as the creature in the crate began to uncurl from a tight, black ball.

"It's a boggen!" cried Willamena.

"No, it's a bogie!" corrected Cook.

"Whatever it is, it eats fairies," said Martin. "Let's help it outside." He set the lid gingerly back on top of the emerging head and the three of them dragged the crate to the steps and up and outside. Thousands of fairies fluttered in consternation a short distance from the cellar door, making an empty space all around the crate.

The boggen, if that's what it was, emerged from its container on spindly black legs. It stood perhaps a meter high, resembling nothing so much as a stewpot with limbs. Atop its stocky shoulders rested a head that was fully one-third the creature's total size, and when it opened its mouth to yawn, a great red-lined cavern of a mouth seemed to cut its face in half. As it turned its back to the sun and stretched elongated arms, wrinkled black lumps on its shoulders unfurled into leathery wings and began to beat slowly back and forth in the warming morning air.

Disraeli, watching from under the potting shed, retreated step by step until only the glow of his eyes betrayed his presence.

"Wings?" asked Willamena.

"Perhaps it's not a boggen, then," said Cook, "or a bogie either; but if it eats fairies, it can be the King of Spain, for all I care."

"We'll soon see," said Martin. He hardened his heart as best he could against what he was about to witness. It was for the best, he knew.

The beating of the boggen's wings increased in strength and speed until it finally attained a kind of halting flight. Yellow eyes swiveled this way and that as it rose and banked toward a retreating mass of fairies, gaining speed as it flew. It overtook them easily and began shoveling handfuls of small victims into its red maw with deep, satisfied grunts. Thousands more bolted from the immediate area. Martin thought he might faint. He lowered himself

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hastily to the ground and watched the slaughter with a growing sense of horror.

"Oh, my goodness! Oh, dear!" Miss Morgan stood in the back doorway in her nightgown, long silver hair down around her shoulders, and gazed in alarm at the pieces of crate ringing the cellar door. "Martin, what have you done?"

Martin stood and faced her. "I was only trying to find some way to help. I know you didn't want anyone to know about them, but the town was dying. I had to do something."

"Daddy made me promise never to use them," she said in a stunned whisper.

"I know," Martin said. "But he's not here to see what that promise is costing others. You are. How can you continue to wreak your father's retribution on people who've done nothing to deserve it? You're not a little girl anymore—you're the last of the Morgans and the first citizen of Morgan's Glen and the keeper of the Morgan obligation." Martin stopped, realizing suddenly who it was he was reproaching. He had, he realized, gone much too far. "I suppose you'll be wanting me to pack up and go," he said.

"It was my idea as much as Martin's," said Cook. She took a step closer to Martin and took his arm. "I know you didn't want to hear those things, but he's right, you know, and if he must leave, then I must, too."

"I've a share of the blame for it as well," said Willamena. She took Martin's other arm and the three of them faced their employer, firm in their resolve and trembling only a little.

Miss Morgan regarded them with arms crossed in front of her chest. "I'm damned if I'll lose my entire household over it before I've had my morning tea." She walked a few steps away from them and watched the boggen doing the awful thing it was born to do, then squared her shoulders and turned back to meet Martin's eyes with the look of one who knows her duty. "One won't be nearly enough for the job, you know."

Within minutes, the cellar porch was littered with empty melon crates and the sky above the yard was filled with ungraceful black brutes scooping up fairies with outsized hands and colossal mouths. As they ranged outward into the street, the fairies retreated by the hundreds of thousands, leaving only stragglers to be devoured. The spectacle proceeded across town until the boggens were largish blots in the sky, and the only fairies in evidence were a

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few dazed creatures peeking out from under bushes and lawn chairs.

Miss Morgan turned to look at the diminishing cloud of fairies and boggens. "Not much use for a preserve now, I'd say. We'll have fairies in our summers again, won't we?"

Martin went to stand beside her. "Yes, but not so many at a time, I think."

"We'll just make that pot of tea," said Cook, catching hold of Willamena's arm and dragging her along to the back door.

"It's all a matter of balance, I suppose," said Miss Morgan. "The solution will bring problems of its own, but still it *is* a solution."

"What sort of problems?" Martin asked.

"Oh, they'll carry off the occasional small pet — fortunately they're not strong enough to lift a child — and they do have the habit of flying into lighted windows with rather messy results. Daddy was wrong about them, though. They belong in our world, too." She smiled up at him. "And of course I've kept a few unopened crates on the back shelf for posterity."

A slightly stunned fairy wobbled toward her on unsteady wings and perched on her outstretched finger. Another fluttered just beyond Disraeli's reach near the potting shed. Here and there Martin saw with a glad heart the flutter of movement and the sparkle of wings among the tree branches.

Miss Morgan sighed. The fairy on her finger danced into the air, and Martin watched it rise up, spiraling higher and higher until it was lost against the sun.

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"The Light at the End of the Day" marks Carrie Richerson's second publication. On the strength of her first ("A Dying Breed" October/November, 1992), she has received a John W. Campbell Award nomination for Best New Writer.

This story also explores Carrie's strange near-future world, where the dead rise up to speak out about the crimes which killed them.

The Light at the End of the Day

By Carrie Richerson

SHE SLIPS INTO THE EARTH without protest or complaint. Cool dirt laps at her flanks, cushions her shoulders, covers her thighs and breasts. She would smile, but clods fill her mouth. Loam covers her eyes. In the darkness she hears the last spadefuls of dirt thrown upon her mound, then silence.

It is peaceful in the dark, cool and restful. She sleeps. Bacteria bloom in her gut; the gaseous products of decomposition bloat her carcass. When the drying skin can no longer take the strain, it ruptures in a dozen places. Rot proceeds more swiftly after that. Maggots feast at the table of her eyes, grubworms hollow out the cathedral of her skull, fungi make short work of internal organs. The yeasty smell of fermentation reminds her of the rowdy beer halls of her youth. Muscles are eaten away; the skin tans to parchment, then flakes to dust.

Years pass. She sleeps, she dreams, she is at peace.

Her name is Tina Westphall. She was thirty-eight years old when she died. One day, she wakes. She wants to go home.

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As she sits up, something small and dully shiny slips through her ribs and rings on her vertebrae. She picks it out of the leaf mould with long, tapered finger bones. It is a flattened metal ovoid, just the size and shape to fit in the splintered depression on the inside of her left sixth rib at the back. She lays it with care in among the other small treasures heaped at the side of the grave.

She stands at the edge of the wood for a long time, savoring the thousand and one details of a world she has almost forgotten. The sun has just set; a band of vermillion, frosted with a delicate violet, flares along the western horizon. Whippoorwills call and answer. Beyond the pond a wild turkey gobbles a command to his harem. A cricket begins to chirp somewhere close by. Too close. With a gentle nudge of her forefinger she persuades the insect to vacate the eye socket in which it had taken refuge.

The breeze sliding among her bones is cool, but not cold. As the dusk deepens, an enormous tangerine moon pushes above the low hills to the east. The grass in the pasture rises higher than her knees; its heads are full and silvery, and the stems whisper papery secrets to her tibia. October, then. But of what year?

A whine, a joyous bark, a rattle, and she is almost bowled over by a hurtling skeletal form. "Hayden, old pup! Did you decide to take a walk, too? Good dog — I can use the company." She caresses the smooth skull that thrusts insistently into her hands, pats the clacking ribs. She misses the hollow thump, like a ripe watermelon, his chest used to give in answer to her comradely slap.

Hayden weaves loops and figure-eights around her as she heads down the pasture's gentle slope. The dog snuffles into every rabbit burrow, wags his percussive tail until it threatens to come off. At the bottom of the hill, the gate sags open on a broken hinge. Rotted fenceposts lean drunkenly, and the barbed wire is brittle with rust. She shakes her head over the damage. She has been away too long.

The yard behind the small, native-stone house used to be a cheerful chaos of projects-in-progress. She remembers a hay-baler under constant repair, a new milking stanchion under construction, a portable forge for the semi-annual horseshoeing. Now the smooth dirt lies tidy and quiet in the moonlight. There is less than a quarter-cord of firewood in the rick, and her favorite kindling hatchet, its handle worn smooth against her callused palm,

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no longer hangs beside the back door. Though she is standing downwind of the barn that rises east of the house, the night breeze brings her no whiff of manure or sleepy rustle and bleat of goats. The homestead could be abandoned, except for the light that spills from the kitchen window.

She moves to the window and peers in. A figure in faded jeans and shapeless workshirt is hunched over a bowl of soup and a book at the old kitchen table; an untouched sandwich sits on a plate to one side. For a moment she does not recognize the person, but the bare feet curled over the rungs of the stool identify Jamie. Jamie always went barefoot around the house, even on the coldest winter day. She remembers how nice it was to snuggle into bed on an icy night and warm her frozen feet between Jamie's radioactive soles. She would smile at the memory, if she could.

The lustrous, sooty-black, butt-length hair she had so cherished, that had hung about her like smoke when they made love, has gone all gray now, but it is still gathered into a single thick braid down Jamie's back. She is glad Jamie has not cut it. A moment longer she stands and watches Jamie spoon up soup, then she traps the doorknob in her bony grip, opens the door, and walks inside.

Jamie looks up at the intrusion; the spoon freezes in mid air, then begins to tremble, but there is no fear in her eyes. "Tina?"

Tina closes the door behind her. "Yes." Her voice is a creaky whisper.

Jamie sighs, lowers the spoon into the bowl, marks her spot in the book and closes it. "I had almost given up hope that you'd come back."

Tina looks around the well-ordered kitchen without moving from her place by the door. Some things have changed — the refrigerator is newer and larger, and there is a real gas range instead of her cherished wood stove — but so much is exactly the same. It even smells the same: a combination of coffee, molasses, compost, and fresh-baked bread. She might have walked out of it last night, of her own volition, instead of having been carried out, so long ago. "You expected me?"

"There was talk at the post office.... Dead — some dead people have been turning up in town, gathering at the sheriff's office or going to their homes. The county commissioners are running around like headless chickens, telling everyone not to panic." Something between laughter and tears quivers in Jamie's voice.

Tina moves forward into the light, rests her skeletal hands on the back

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of the chair across from Jamie, meets Jamie's hazel gaze with her own empty sockets. "*Some* dead people?" she asks.

Jamie drops her eyes, fidgets with the soup spoon, pushing it back and forth along the edge of the bowl. Once upon a time, the sound would have grated on Tina's nerves.

"It's only murdered people, isn't it?" Tina says.

Jamie stops fiddling with the spoon and looks up again. The tears are running down her cheeks now, but she doesn't flinch from Tina's blank stare. "It wasn't *murder*. I never meant for the gun to go off like that. And I've spent every day of the last twenty years regretting it."

"I know."

"It was an accident, I swear."

Tina moves to the sink. A heavy chef's knife lies on the sideboard. "I know."

"It was so stupid. I don't even remember what we were arguing about."

The knife is very sharp. Jamie had always taken pride in having a good set of knives for the kitchen, and in keeping them in excellent condition and sharpness. Tina picks it up. It takes her a moment to get the feel of its balance against the slick plates of her palm. "I know."

She also does not remember what the argument had been about. A remark made in jest, but misinterpreted? She'd had a sarcastic tongue, once. Or perhaps, another woman? Jamie had often accused her of being born to flirt. Maybe money had been tight, but when was it ever not? What inarticulate, mushrooming rage had set Jamie to drinking sullenly and cleaning her target pistol that night?

She cannot remember. It has been too long. She only remembers Jamie, half-drunk and waving the pistol around, and her own exasperation at the theatrics, grabbing for the gun to take it away. She hadn't realized Jamie had reloaded it. A thunderclap of noise, a shock that had stolen her breath away, and how utterly silent everything had been after. Jamie's face had gone so white that Tina was sure the gun had discharged into Jamie's body. Then she had felt herself falling, marveled to see so much blood pumping out over her chest. Nothing clear after that, until Jamie's strong arms had lowered her into the earth.

Jamie wipes a hand over her wet face as though brushing away cobwebs, then blows her nose fiercely into her napkin. "I'm sorry about burying you

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up there in the woodlot. I panicked. I didn't think anyone would believe that it was an accident."

Tina moves back to the table, to stand beside Jamie. "Didn't anyone ask about me?"

Jamie looks up at her. The net of crow's-feet around her eyes tells of years of loneliness and regrets, and also, perhaps, of years of work and satisfactions and triumphs that Tina has not shared. Tina notices that even Jamie's eyelashes have turned gray. "I told people that you had left me for another lover. You didn't have any family, and we hadn't made any close friends around here. Nobody pushed it." She shakes her head helplessly. "I've *missed* you. Twenty years, and I've never stopped missing you. I used to go up and sit by the grave and talk to you, all the time. I stopped going so often when I figured out I was wearing a path right to you, and that probably wasn't so smart. But I'd still go, at least twice a year, and take you little things I thought you might like, crystals, shells."

"I know. I saw them. They're pretty."

Jamie is still looking up at her. "I know you must hate me." She pauses, then sighs. "I always used to be able to tell how angry you were just by looking at you." She cocks her head slightly to one side, exposing her throat. Her eyes don't move from Tina's sockets.

Tina looks at the thin, wrinkled skin of the proffered throat and sees the unbending pride and taut passion of twenty years gone. The knife hangs from her hand like a steel memory. She hefts it and pulls the plate toward her. The knife flashes in front of Jamie's face as Tina runs it through the sandwich with a single, fluid stroke. She pushes the plate with its two neat triangles back toward Jamie. "Eat your sandwich. And your soup is getting cold."

Tina takes the knife to the sink, washes and dries it and puts it away. Jamie obediently picks up the spoon, then puts it down again. "There's something else I have to tell you. Hayden got real sick a few years after...the accident. I had to put him down. I buried him up there near you."

"I have a surprise for you," Tina says. She opens the kitchen door and whistles into the darkness. It sounds like someone strangling a rusty teakettle. Hayden bounds barking and clattering into the room.

After a while Jamie stops crying and Hayden stops trying to climb into her lap. She wipes her face and blows her nose. "Will you stay? Will you both stay?"

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"I can't speak for Hayden, here — but I'd like to stay. For a while. If I may."

"Of course. For as long as you like. As long as you *can.*" Jamie speaks around a mouthful of sandwich. "I have some old Ingrid Bergman movies. We could watch them after dinner."

"You remember my weaknesses very well."

"And after movies...."

"Yes?"

"I'm giving you a bath. You're filthy!"

IN BED THAT night, Jamie's arm thrown across her bare ribs, Jamie's breath fluttering against the base of her skull, the intricate puzzles of her feet pressed between Jamie's molten soles, Tina finally realizes just how chilled her bones have been all these years, and is warmed. She stares into the dark corners of the bedroom for hours, and remembers other times in this bed, with this woman. Sometime around dawn, she slips into something like sleep.

When she wakes in the morning, Tina is alone in the bed. Sitting up, she is amused to find that Jamie has provided a pair of slippers for her. She thinks about how much time she saves by not having to perform the morning rituals of washing her face and dressing. She is not sure this is a blessing.

Tina finds Jamie in the kitchen, finishing her breakfast. The rich smells of coffee, oatmeal and honey are tantalizing. Tina misses eating.

The first blush of reunion has worn off. Jamie looks bemused and slightly wary as she asks, "What did you want to do today?"

"I thought I'd work on repairing the fence. And I need to cut you some firewood. You don't have enough to get you through the first cold snap." There is mild reproof in Tina's tone. The homestead had never been so unprepared for winter when she had been alive.

Jamie sighs and yanks on her braid in frustration. "You know how two-cycle engines always hated me. I never could get that damned chain saw to run for more than one tankful of gas. Besides, I'm not as young as I used to be. These days, I pay Tim Cox to deliver a couple of cords in the fall. I just haven't gotten around to it yet this year, is all."

"The last time I saw little Timmy Cox, he was in training pants."

Jamie laughs, and they are friends again. "Well, he still has the bluest

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eyes you've ever seen, and a grin that lights up the countryside. And he still says 'Yes'm' and 'No'm' and takes time to help out an old woman with her chores."

Jamie has found an old pair of size small leather gloves to improve Tina's grip on tools. They work together through the morning, and it is almost like old times. Tina labors tirelessly; she seems stronger now than ever. But by noon, Jamie is pasty-faced with fatigue and short of breath. Tina sends her inside to eat and rest.

Tina remembers how strong Jamie used to be. She remembers how the two of them used to work together like a miraculous machine, telegraphing intentions to one another with a grunt or the cock of an elbow, handing tools before they were asked for. She remembers working shirtless through blazing summer days, immersed in the flinty smell of hot dust, the sun raising freckles on top of freckles on her shoulders and breasts, while Jamie's Latin complexion darkened to the hue of old pecans. She remembers the salty taste of a sweaty nipple teased in passing, and the way Jamie used to pick her up and hurl her into the horse trough at the end of an exhausting, gritty, satisfying day.

Tina sighs, a soft sound like the wind moaning through a graveyard, and renews her grip on the posthole digger. Some things, it seems, are gone forever.

Inside the house, watching the rich October light splinter on the white, white bones of her lover, Jamie is thinking the same thing.

Tina has been home a week before she and Jamie find the courage to try to make love. Tina regrets the lack of a tongue, but her fingers are as clever and knowing as ever. She is gratified that she can still please Jamie. For herself, she discovers that the hollows of her pelvis and the smooth slopes of her femurs are surprisingly sensitive to stroking. Jamie's caresses set her to trembling until her vertebrae click together like dice. She reaches no peak of pleasure, but afterward, holding a sleeping Jamie in the cage of her arms, she is content.

The kitchen steams with the smells of fruit and cinnamon. Jamie is making an apple-spice cake for tomorrow's Volunteer Fire Department bake sale. Tina sits on a stool mixing a sour cream frosting for the cake. She stirs

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carefully. Last week three of her finger joints fell into the soup she was making, but a little super glue seems to have solved the problem.

Jamie has spent much time and effort cleaning and polishing all of Tina's bones. Each evening she sprays Tina down in the shower, then dries her with a blow dryer. She uses one of her fine-bristled artist's brushes to clean tight joints and to dust out Tina's eye sockets. The brush tickles; Tina squirms and giggles under Jamie's ministrations, and they almost always wind up making love afterward.

Jamie has begun experimenting with colors on Tina's bones. Today, the long bones of Tina's arms and legs are stained a deep mahogany, the ends of her fingers and toes are painted come-fuck-me red, and there is a wide, iridescent purple, mohawk stripe across the dome of her skull. Tina isn't sure about the purple. She thinks she will wash it off tonight.

The windowpane at Tina's elbow is fogged with condensation. She wipes a small circle clear with a towel and peers out. The overcast December day is darkening to a charcoal night. The pond behind the house seems to trap the last of the pewter light and hold it jealously. A single duck, a holdout from the southward migrations, carves a vee-shaped scar in the surface. The light fades with the last ripple.

On an impulse, she traces "Tina + Jamie" inside a heart on the fogged glass with the tip of her index fingerbone. Straightening from checking the cake in the oven, Jamie sees the outline and smiles. She crosses to Tina and peers into the bowl she is stirring. Tina dips a finger into the frosting and offers it to Jamie to taste. Jamie licks the sweet goo off the bone, and the sensation is so suddenly sexual that Tina groans. Jamie's eyes light with passion. She grasps the arches of Tina's pelvis and runs her tongue along the line of Tina's jawbone. Pleasure shivers along Tina's spine and sets all her joints ticking together.

They are interrupted by the sound of tires crunching gravel in the driveway. Jamie swears and goes to look out the living room window. When she returns to the kitchen, she is pale and agitated. "It's the sheriff, Tina."

Tina does not want to answer questions about the implications of her resurrection. She does not want Jamie to have to answer questions about it, either. "I'll wait in the bedroom," she volunteers. "Where's Hayden?"

"Outside, I think. Hope he stays there."

Tina leaves the bedroom door open an inch. She hears Jamie open the

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front door. "Sheriff Webster, come in. I was just making some hot tea. Would you like a cup? It's herbal."

Tina vaguely recalls meeting Doris Webster on a few occasions: a young, quiet-spoken deputy directing traffic at a football game; a mother-to-be in the grocery store; on duty, with her husband and new baby, at a community Christmas lighting ceremony. The stocky woman with white, close-cropped hair under the Stetson she is removing is unrecognizable. "Thank you, Ms. Alvarado. A cup of something hot sure sounds good on a cold evening like this." Webster places the hat on the coffee table and calls out after the disappearing Jamie, "Smells wonderful in here."

Tina hears Jamie moving about in the kitchen. Her voice floats over the clink of china. "I'm baking a cake for the VFD sale tomorrow."

The sheriff studies one of Jamie's canvases over the couch. "It's bound to be a hit. I plan to make them some brownies if I ever get home tonight."

Jamie returns with a steaming cup. "Ah, chamomile. My favorite," Webster says. There is something in the sheriff's voice, something in the way she takes the cup from Jamie — Tina is suddenly sure that these women have shared a special relationship in the past. Were they lovers, she wonders? How long ago? How long had she been dead?

"You didn't stop by for a cup of tea or to swap recipes, Doris. What can I do for you?" There is that no-nonsense note in Jamie's voice that has commanded the attention and obedience of lovers, dogs, mules, men — and sheriffs — for six decades. In the dark behind the door, Tina grins widely.

Webster sips her tea and smiles in appreciation. "Well, Jamie, it seems that one or two of your neighbors have reported a strange visitor staying here. Someone they thought I should check out." She takes another sip of tea and closes her eyes to savor the steam. She reminds Tina of a wise, placid monkey.

"Betty Culpepper, I'll bet! Damn it, I might as well live in a city!" Jamie's tone is acid. Tina would grin more widely still, if she could. "I suggest you tell that nosy old biddy to mind — "

Tina hears it before the sheriff or Jamie: the slap of the dog door, the click of nails on the kitchen floor — and Hayden bounds rattling into the living room. The pause stretches out, until Jamie issues a tense, "Sit down, Hayden!" Tina hears a clatter and whine as the dog obeys.

Webster smiles, unfazed, and drinks her tea. "Interesting animal you have there," is her only comment. Tina admires the unflappable sheriff. She

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pushes open the bedroom door and walks out into the living room.

"It's all right, Jamie. We have nothing to hide, Sheriff. We just value our privacy. I'm Tina Westphall." She extends her hand to the sheriff, who takes it without hesitation.

"Westphall? It's been a long time.... I remember now. You left these parts rather suddenly, as I recall." The deep-set gray eyes in the lined face appear to miss nothing as they survey Tina from crown to toe. Nothing, especially the splintered divot in her back rib. Tina fights off an urge to place her palm over the spot. She removes her hand from the sheriff's grip and moves to a chair. Jamie comes to stand behind her and puts one hand protectively over Tina's shoulder.

"That's right, Doris — we value our privacy. We don't need Betty Culpepper's prying...or *yours.*"

Tina sees the hurt that flashes in Webster's eyes at Jamie's words, but the sheriff's response is mild. "I'm just doing my job, Jamie. No need to get huffy. I've had some experience with situations like this, you know." The sheriff's gaze moves again to Tina's damaged rib, then back to her unreadable face. "You have nothing you wish to discuss with me, Ms. Westphall?"

Jamie's hand tightens on Tina's shoulder joint as Tina answers, "No, Sheriff Webster. There is nothing for you here."

Doris Webster sets the teacup and saucer down and picks up her Stetson. "Then I'd best be going. Jim hates to wait supper on me, and I still have those brownies to fix. Good night, ladies."

Jamie closes the door after Webster and stares out the window for long moments after the sound of the car has faded. For a moment, when she turns back to Tina, Tina thinks she sees tears glittering in Jamie's lashes, but Jamie's tone is crisp as she says, "Now, where were we?"

"Do I smell something burning?" Tina asks.

WINTER PASSES like a slow, easy breath. Tina works outside when the weather permits; the farmstead shakes off its neglected air and shines with new wood, fresh paint, oiled engines. Most evenings Tina and Jamie spend alone, content to share each other's quiet company over books or movies, but some nights or Sunday afternoons, Doris Webster and her daughter Tamara come over to play bridge. Tina enjoys these times. She feels

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no threat from Doris; whatever she and Jamie shared, it is long over. And the sheriff seems to have accepted the fact that she will never be privy to Tina's mysterious dis- and reappearance.

Over their matches, Webster tells them stories — some humorous, some heartbreaking — of other dead, walking again among the living. Tamara is a lay visitor for her church and talks about her special ministry to the dead and their still-living, loving, confused relatives. The firelight suffuses the women's skins and Tina's bones with shades of rose and gold. Hayden sleeps on the rug in front of the fire as though his bones still appreciated the soaking warmth, and sometimes his paws twitch and he whines without waking. Tina wonders if the rabbits he chases in his sleep are living or spectral.

It is a late afternoon in early April. Tina is standing on the bank of the pond, casting for bluegill. Jamie has expressed an interest in fish for supper, so Tina is trying her luck. She has told Jamie, though, that if she catches any fish, Jamie will have to clean them. Tina has always been squeamish about cleaning fish.

The sky is cloudless. The light rolls over her in amber waves as thick and slow as honey dripping from a spoon. She feels like a fossil, nailed to that amber moment. She *is* a fossil. Somewhere in that sweet uncoiling is the secret of time, all the time she has lost, all the time she has been given back. The late-afternoon light conveys this wisdom to her. She wishes she understood it.

A melodious honking drifts down to release her. She tips back the Belarus gimme cap she is wearing to stick fishhooks in, and looks up. A fluttering line of geese is making its way north. They wheel, and the light on their wings is pearl. Beneath their beating pinions, the sky is as still and solemn as a child's face...waiting...waiting.

The knowledge plucks and thrums along her bones, like an almost-audible call, that to every season, even a season of miracles, there is an end. She has no more choice than the geese do. Choices are for the living.

She reels in her hook and walks back to the house. Hayden is off somewhere, investigating interesting holes or patrolling the fence line. Jamie is in the kitchen making biscuits, and thawing some chicken in case Tina doesn't catch any fish. She turns around when she hears Tina enter. Flour dusts her arms to the elbows, and there is a smear of it across her forehead

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where she has rubbed the back of her hand.

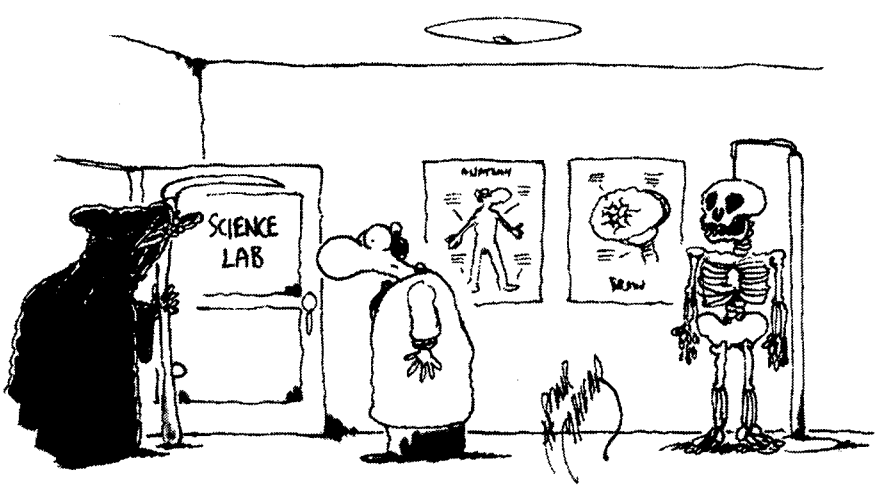
Somehow she knows before Tina speaks. Perhaps the knowledge is in her bones, too. "I have to go," Tina says.

Jamie crosses to stand in front of Tina, and searches the smooth plates of her face as though she could read the future there. "So soon?"

"Yes." If Tina had breath, she would be holding it, waiting for another miracle.

Jamie wipes her hands on her apron and takes it off. Her jaw sets with that determination that Tina remembers falling in love with so long ago. "I lost you once. I won't let it happen again. I'm coming with you."

They leave the chicken and the biscuits, and the door standing wide open behind them. Fleshy hand in bony one, they climb the gentle slope of the back pasture to the woodlot. As they lie down in the cool, damp dirt, just before Tina gathers the earth over them, Hayden comes crashing through the brush and flops across their feet.



"I have come to take you, Professor Hanover....Whoa! Babe Alert!"

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"Lost in the Shopping Mall" marks Allen Steele's first publication in F&SF. *Allen has written short fiction for* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Science Fiction Age, *and several anthologies. He has published six novels. His seventh,* The Jericho Iteration, *will appear from Ace in 1994.*

Allen says the idea for this story came in part from witnessing a demonstration of a computer-generated "shopping mall" while visiting a cybernetics lab in Austin, Texas.

Lost in the Shopping Mall

By Allen Steele

THE DAY AFTER REBECCA DiMiola became lost in the shopping mall, Joe Bass caught the TWA morning flight from Boston to St. Louis. He could have just as easily found her while sitting in CybeServe's corporate headquarters in Framingham, but that wasn't the way he did things. Especially not when children were involved; kids were always the toughest ones to track down, and Bass intuitively needed to meet Rebecca face to face before he could bring her home.

The company's senior sales representative in St. Louis met Bass at the gate when the plane arrived at Lambert International. He was a big-boned midwesterner with the obligatory salesman's mustache and a mouth which seemed to be charged by solar cells; he said hardly anything until after he escorted Bass out to the short-term parking lot, but as soon as they were alone in the car he began to talk non-stop—quickly, nervously, less as conversation than as a nonstop drone, as if the hot summer sun had energized his vocal cords:

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"We don't know how it could have happened...the family had all the usual fail-safes installed in the default directory...her father had even put a one-hour timer on the system, but you know kids today, they can crack anything if you leave 'em alone long enough...."

"They do," Bass said. He absently caressed the aluminum briefcase laid across his knees which contained his portable system. The sales rep had stowed his carry-on bag in the trunk, but the computer had never left his hands since he had walked off the jet.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you...caught my own kid downloading beta-test games from one of the IBM boards last years...locked him out of the computer for six months, that taught him a lesson...but the strange thing is, there haven't been any major purchases except for a pair of sneakers from The Athlete's Foot, and that was in the first fifteen minutes of entry...she hasn't done anything since then...hey, you want a cigarette?"

"No," Bass said. "Don't smoke." He watched the traffic rushing past them on the inner belt. He had never been in St. Louis before, but it looked much the same as Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles, or any other city where CybeServe had previously sent him: exit ramps leading to cookie-cutter suburbs and high-rise business districts, electronic billboards and dead animals lining the shoulders of the highway.

"Good for you...ought to give it up myself...anyway, the hard copy of the initial search is on the back seat if you want to look at it...of course, you've probably seen it already, I dunno...hey, uh, we're not in any trouble for this with the home office, are we?...I mean, all we did was follow the service order, give the customer what they wanted...y'know I'm sympathetic to what's happened to the little girl, but we can't be blamed if something goes wrong, right?...oh and hey, I've snagged a couple of tickets for the Cards game tonight at Busch Stadium, if you want to unwind later on...right behind home plate, and the Mets are in town, so maybe we could grab us a couple of brewskis and...."

Bass looked away from the passing scenery, turned his gaze toward the sales rep. Even though the salesman had told Bass his name at least three times since they had met at the airport, Bass couldn't remember it. There were large wet sweat-stains beneath the armpits of the salesman's shirt, he talked too much, and he was trying to squirm out of any culpability, real or imagined, he had for the situation: those were the lasting impressions Bass

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had of him. The name didn't matter.

"Do me a favor," Bass said. "Just shut up and take me where I gotta go. Okay?"

The salesman's face reddened and his mouth trembled beneath his Burt Reynolds mustache, but at least he stopped talking. He stared straight ahead as he put a little more shoe-leather against the metal, whipping the Ford through the noonday traffic as he mentally updated his resumé, just in case things didn't work out for the better. Bass gratefully lay back against the headrest and shut his eyes, taking temporary comfort in the uneasy silence within the Ford.

Soon he would be meeting Rebecca. That's when the job would begin.

The DiMiola residence was located in Clayton, one of the more upscale suburbs of St. Louis County: large houses on small lots, arranged along tidy streets near mini-malls, trendy restaurants, and small parks. The homes in Rebecca's neighborhood had neat half-acre yards shaded by oak and elm trees; parked in the driveways were late-model BMWs, Mazdas, and Volvos, all beige or red or charcoal-gray. A couple of middle-aged ladies in fluorescent jogging suits, their pinched faces shadowed by sun visors, pigeon-walked down the sidewalk. Bass counted at least three cop cars as they drove through the side streets, and police helicopters constantly prowled the azure sky. American apartheid: the urban combat zones in the north county, where cops and black street gangs waged war every night, were located in a different space-time continuum entirely. Here, the only African-American to be seen was an old man, sweltering in the summer heat as he pushed a mower around somebody else's lawn.

The salesman pulled into the driveway of a two-story neo-Colonial home; he seemed to want to come inside, but Bass wouldn't let him get out of the car. Instead, Bass picked up his case and climbed out of the Ford, asking the salesman to take his carry-on bag to the hotel — he would call a cab once he was through. The salesman looked both chastised and relieved; he murmured something from the common phrasebook of senior sales representatives — *good luck* or *break a leg* or *rightaroonie, good buddy* — before Bass slammed the car door shut. Bass waited until the salesman's Ford had backed out of the driveway and disappeared down the street before he turned and strode up the front walk to the door.

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As he pressed the doorbell, he heard the familiar click-and-whir of a hidden security camera rotating to focus on him. He didn't look around or move, but simply stood in front of the door, gazing at the archaic brass knocker. After a few moments, the electronic lock buzzed, then the door was opened from within.

The woman who answered the bell looked like a younger version of the two joggers he had seen a few minutes ago: artificially blonde and slender, aristocratic yet somehow graceless, as if her fading early-40s beauty had been purchased from the cosmetics counter at Lord & Taylor, her regal bearing the result of late-night readings from Miss Manners. She wore a bright orange jogging suit — apparently the uniform of choice for the housewives of Clayton — and she didn't smile as she peered through the half-open door, but studied Bass for a moment before she spoke.

"Oh," she said, feigning polite surprise. "You must be from the computer company."

As if he hadn't already been scanned by the door camera. It was easy to imagine how she saw him: a pudgy little man with a receding hairline and a soft stomach, wearing an off-the-rack business suit from J.C. Penney's and old shoes from Sears. Definitely not Clayton material.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "Joseph Bass, from the CybeServe Corporation." He put down his computer, pulled his card case from the inside pocket of his case, and extended one of his business cards to her. "I'm here to see Rebecca DiMiola."

"I see..." She took the card and glanced at it, matching the holograph against his face. When she looked up again, her narrow gaze darted back and forth past him, as if scanning the sidewalk beyond her front lawn to see if anyone was watching. Then she tucked the card into a pocket, opened the door a little wider and stepped out of the way. "Please come in, Mr. Bass."

"Thank you, ma'am." He wiped his feet on the doormat — stenciled *The DiMiolas*, with an embroidered picture of a golden retriever sitting in a country meadow — then walked into the front hallway. Everything in sight was marble, china, Irish glass and Brazilian mahogany, with not so much as a dustbunny in sight. Nice house. "You must be...."

"Mrs. DiMiola. Evangeline DiMiola." She held out her hand, palm down; Bass put down his briefcase and grasped it. The skin of her palm was very soft and smooth; she had never held anything harder than the handle of

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a tennis racket. The handshake was brief and perfunctory. "I'm so glad you could come so quickly, Mr....what did you say your name was, again?"

"Bass. Joseph Bass."

She smiled very slightly, then eased the door shut behind him.

"Is Mr. DiMiola here?"

Her smile faded as she stepped back, folding her arms together. "My husband is out of town," she said. "He's in Japan on business. He...." Her gaze traveled to the floor, studying the Indian carpet beneath their feet, as she murmured something indistinct.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. DiMiola," Bass said. "I didn't catch that."

Evangeline DiMiola looked up again; for a moment, there was a pleading look in her eyes. "He doesn't know what's happened to Rebecca," she repeated. "He hasn't called since two, three days ago. I didn't want him to know because if he did, he might..."

Again, her voice trailed off and her gaze wandered. "Get upset?" Bass finished.

"Yes. He might get upset." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, apparently recollecting herself. When she looked at him again, her gaze was again hard and direct. "When I spoke to someone from your company on the phone, they said that they would send someone to help, but I wasn't sure what they meant. Can you tell me what you do, Mr. Bass?" She frowned a little. "Are you some sort of technician?"

She could have been asking if he was a plumber or a licensed electrician. "I'm a consultant for the company," he said. "A cybernetics psychologist...sort of a computer shrink."

"Ohhhh... I see." Evangeline DiMiola tried to look world-wise, yet at the same time she seemed to flinch at the word "shrink." Bass wondered how much time she herself had spent in therapy, spending a hundred dollars an hour to deal with upper-class anxiety.

"If you want to know my credentials," he went on, "I've been employed by CybeServe for the last three years, handling situations much like your own." Again, the slightest flinch and frown. "Before that, I was a research associate at M.I.T.'s artificial intelligence lab, after I received my doctorate in psychology from Vanderbilt and did my clinicals at Baptist Hospital in Nashville. I've also done some consultant work for IBM and Toshiba, and...."

"Okay, okay. I understand." Ms. DiMiola impatiently waved her hand.

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"What I want to know is, can you fix my daughter?"

Not *help*. Not *cure*. Not even *talk to*...she had said *fix*, as if she was discussing a washing machine with a broken rotor or a car which had inconveniently blown a radiator gasket. She seemed to realize the gaffe as soon as she had uttered it; her face reddened beneath the Estée Lauder makeup, yet her eyes became challenging, daring him to make something of it. He was the serviceman, here to deal with an appliance which had failed to perform according to its warranty specifications.

Which, in a sense, was the truth.

Bass said nothing; he dispassionately waited for her to go on. He had been in this situation before; he knew what she would inevitably say, as certainly as if this whole conversation had been flow-charted and logic-diagramed. "I want..." Evangeline DiMiola began, then paused to reconsider her words. "I would like for you to see my daughter." A deep breath. "To see if you can make her speak to me again."

Bass still didn't respond. He waited for the only word he wanted from her.

She knew what he wanted; her mouth trembled slightly as she spoke. "Please," she almost whispered.

"Certainly, Ms. DiMiola," he said. Then he picked up his briefcase and took a single step off the foyer carpet. Entering her nice house was a little victory, and he allowed her a little smile as a consolation prize. "Now, if you'll take me to her, please...?"

EVANGELINE DIMIOLA escorted Joe Bass across the chandeliered first-floor hall and up the winding main staircase to the second floor of her house, but before they went to see Rebecca, he asked if he could see the girl's room. She hesitated for a moment, then silently nodded and led him to a bedroom next to the stairway.

Rebecca DiMiola had not lived the first fifteen years of her life in poverty. She slept on a queen-size four-poster which was covered with a blue down comforter and a large assortment of stuffed animals. She had her own high-definition TV, complete with Sega box and cable hookup; on her desk was an Apple MacIII computer and a videophone; in a cabinet was a CD stereo system. Posters of rock idols and famous young teenage TV stars were thumbtacked to the eggshell-white walls, and in an open closet were hung

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new clothes: silk party dresses, stylish school outfits, sweatshirts and pre-faded Levis 502 jeans. On the bookshelf next to her bed were copies of everything from *Charlotte's Web* to Kitty Kelly exposés to trade-paperback comic books; on top of the shelf was a glass jar filled with loose change, mostly nickels and dimes.

"She's an only child, you know," her mother said as Bass stood in the center of the bedroom, taking everything in. "She almost had a younger brother once, but...well, there was an accident, so she's the only kid we have."

"Kid," he whispered under his breath. Wonderful word, that. Formerly used to describe an adolescent goat. Bass walked over to the dresser. Beneath the glass top were a couple of dozen photos, ranging from baby pictures to recent snapshots. He stopped and looked down at them. Rebecca had been a bright, shining little girl who had gone many places and done many things. Here, she rode a pony at summer camp in the Ozarks. There, she played in the surf at Maui. Posed next to a beefeater next to the gates of Buckingham Palace, looked through the eyepiece of a large telescope in a great observatory, stood on her head in front of the White House — always smiling, waving, full of adolescent joy. A princess from Missouri.

"Maybe we spoiled her a little too much, you know." Her mother's voice came from a distance behind him. "Whenever she wanted something, all she had to do was ask. Perhaps that's spoiling her, but...God, if you have the money, why not? At least she's not like her friend Rosie...her parents were hippies, raised the kid on some godawful commune in Tennessee where they only ate brown rice and tofu...."

But something changed as Rebecca grew older; Bass could see it in the later photos. In her transition from childhood to her teenage years, Rebecca's smile gradually faded, lapsing into a sullen stare. She lost her pixie figure and got fat, then lost all the weight again and became anorexic. Her breasts grew; when she was thirteen, she tried to hide them beneath baggy sweaters, but two years later she had taken to midriff sweaters in winter and tight T-shirts in summer. She changed her hair color from blonde to mousy brown and back to blonde again, gradually letting it grow down past her shoulders. And she stopped going to Hawaii and England and Washington D.C.; most of the recent pictures were taken in other people's houses.

"We tried to send her off to boarding school," Evangeline DiMiola

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continued, "but she lasted only a couple of months before she was thrown out. We put her in Country Day...good school, best in the city...but even then her grades didn't improve. And I didn't like...y'know, the other sort of kids she was hanging out with. From the south side you know...."

Recognizable in two of the older pictures was a younger woman who was Evangeline DiMiola, before the shopping trips got to her, but in none of the photos was anyone who could be said to be her father. And after childhood, Rebecca was almost always alone when her picture had been taken, as if she had demanded someone to shoot a photo, or had used a camera's timer to issue a blurry self-portrait. In one shot, she was flipping the bird at the camera; in another, she was sitting on her bed, wearing only her underwear bra and panties, a can of malt liquor cradled in her lap. In that picture, she looked less like a princess than a drunken ghost.

"When did she start using computers?" Bass asked.

"Hmmm?...oh, computers." Evangeline DiMiola awoke from her reverie. "When she was about nine, ten, I guess...her father bought her one after she used his to do a science project for her fourth grade class. She's had one ever since." Her condescending tone returned, yet this time mixed with ill-disguised bafflement. "She's always been good with computers, God knows why. I mean, when I was her age, I didn't know what an...ah, an Intel 686 was, or what an eighty-megawhatsis was. Why does a little girl need to know...?"

"When did you and your husband buy the VR system from us, Ms. DiMiola?"

She shut up and stared at him. When she spoke again, her voice had become as glacial as her eyes. "About six months ago, Mr. Bass," she said. "That's when Mr. DiMiola had the spare bedroom turned into a..."

The rest of the sentence was bitten off by another dark frown. "A dataroom," Bass finished.

"Yes. The dataroom. Down the hall." Evangeline's mouth had become a thin, dense line of lipstick. "Donald...my husband...gave it to her for Christmas last year. She tried all the other services...the games, the tours, stuff like that...but she really got attached to the Gallerie Virtual. Pretty soon, that's all she wanted to do when she was home. Go hang out in the mall."

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at him. "It's still covered by the

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warranty, you know. I checked it before I called your company. Besides your airfare, I don't believe we owe you for...."

"No. You don't." Bass turned away from the dresser, away from the dusty mosaic of Rebecca's life. He walked toward the door, not wanting to look at her mother's face. "It'll be covered in the final statement. Now, if you'll take me to your daughter, please...."

He was ready to go shopping.

The dataroom was located just down the hall from Rebecca's bedroom; Bass wondered if it had originally been intended to be the nursery for the baby brother who had been lost in the miscarriage. Its walls and ceiling were lined with white foam-padded naugahyde which covered the magnetic sensors; if there had once been windows, they were now bricked over and invisible behind the padding. The room was completely bare of furnishings except for a single leather-upholstered armchair near the VR terminal, which was built into the right wall.

The dataroom was sound-proof, climate controlled, clean and odor-free, and it resembled a padded cell in an insane asylum.

Rebecca DiMiola sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor on the opposite side of the room from the empty chair. Her datagloved hands rested loosely in her lap, and her posture might have suggested zen meditation were it not for her slumped shoulders and bent spine; instead, she looked frail and exhausted, as if she had hiked miles through a hot desert only to arrive at a dry oasis.

Bass walked slowly around the girl, studying her. Most of her face was hidden by the black HMD which covered most of her head except for her nose, mouth, and the lank blonde hair which spilled out from beneath the back of the helmet. The orange Spandex datasuit she wore, normally skin-tight on most people, was slack at her chest and shoulders — she was a very skinny young woman — but it was her mouth, devoid of expression, which caught his attention.

Bass squatted on his hips in front of her, gazing at the opaque mask of her face. "Rebecca," he said, "can you hear me?"

"It's not good," her mother immediately said from the doorway behind him. "I've tried talking to her, begging her, yelling at her, but she won't...."

Bass glared over his shoulder at Evangeline DiMiola; the woman in-

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stantly shut up. His gaze shifted to the VR terminal; green LEDs on the panel told him that the room was still in operation. "You didn't try to unplug her, did you?" he asked quietly. "You didn't push the reset button or reboot the program, or otherwise try to break the link?"

For a second, Ms. DiMiola's expression became hostile. "Of course I didn't!" she snapped. "What do you think I am, stupid? I may not know much about these things, Mr. Bass, but I've read the newspaper stories. I know what can happen if someone's in...what do you call it, VR shock...and they're suddenly unplugged. I can read, you know...."

Bass stared silently at Evangeline DiMiola until her voice trailed off. She sagged against the door frame, suddenly appearing much older than her vanity and cosmetics normally permitted. For the first time since he had entered her home, she looked like a scared, middle-aged woman, trying to understand something which her pampered, sheltered life had never allowed her to contemplate.

"Please," she whispered. "Just do something about my baby."

Bass looked away from her, back at Rebecca's still, hollow face. God help him, how many other kids had he seen like this? Gary in Houston, crouched on a mountain of gold in Smaug's underground lair, lost in a Tolkien fantasy. Crissy in Minneapolis, standing at the edge of an improbably high cliff on Ganymede, entranced by the vision of Jupiter rising above the icy horizon. David, poor David, sitting cross-legged much like Rebecca here, except in a black and featureless void, so flatlined that, in the end, the only recourse had been to unplug him, leaving the seventeen-year-old institutionalized for the rest of his life.

And then there had been Geoff, and Akheem, and Mike, and Dorothea, and Jane....

At first, when he had started working for CybeServe, he had thought them tragic anomalies, freak accidents which occurred from time to time. But he had been doing this for a couple of years now and he knew that there was no shortage of Rebeccas, and he was tired of seeing them. So much pain for so little reason, and his reserve of sympathy was finite. Perhaps this would be the last case he would handle for the company. Let someone else shoulder the responsibility. He was exhausted.

She'll be the last one, he told himself, perfectly aware that this was not the first time he had made this promise to himself.

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Bass took a deep breath and slowly let it out, never taking his eyes away from Rebecca's face. "Please leave us," he said at last. "Rebecca and I have to be alone by ourselves for a little while."

Her mother hesitated. For a moment, Bass thought she was going to argue with him, but then he heard the door close, and he was alone with the girl.

Bass opened his briefcase and prepared to make the jaunt. His gear was strictly industrial, with none of the consumer-friendly frills of the home-market VR equipment: datagloves for his hands, a Snoopy-helmet HMD with a built-in headset mike, a pair of overweight goggles, all hardwired to the portable computer nestled within the foam padding of the briefcase. He used a roll of tape to strap thin sensor cables to his arms and legs, and once he had used another cable to interface his computer to the dataroom's terminal through their serial ports, he ran a quick systems-test to make sure that the link was solid and that his telepresence program was loaded. Then he jaunted into the Gallerie Virtual.

He was standing in the mezzanine of a vast, enclosed shopping mall. Summer sunlight spread its warm rays through ceiling skylights, casting unnatural, too-straight shadows from benches, potted trees, and incidental post-modern sculptures. Luminescent signboards glowed above the wide doorways and awnings of artificial shops, displaying the bright logos of a thousand corporations, marching away into infinity: Timex, Waldenbooks, J. Crew, Banana Republic, Babbage's, Camelot Music, Victoria's Secret, the Gap, Toys 'R Us, Hallmark, Brooks Brothers...an endless corridor of different tastes and interests, materialism rendered pixilated, three-dimensional phantoms of free enterprise.

But the Gallerie Virtual was completely vacant, despite the allure of bright lights and readily available products. Computer-generated beings usually strode through the mall — adults, teenagers, small children — to give the illusion that the mall was occupied and being used by many people. It was even possible to select a function which allowed the visitor to see the other CybeServe subscribers who were presently logged into the Gallerie, permitting somebody in San Francisco to go shopping with a friend who lived in Boston.

Both features were elective, though, and Rebecca had evidently toggled

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them off. This was a bad sign. Bass glanced up at the row of icons displayed in a red border just above his range of vision — **SELECT, VIEW, CREDIT, BUY, HELP,** and **EXIT** — and raised his right hand to point at **HELP**. A pull-down menu was superimposed over the scenery, listing a variety of mall services. He touched the one labeled **OTHER**, opening a second box on top of the first, then spoke aloud. "CybeServe security override," he said. "Bass, Joseph Peter, code Tango Mary Romeo three-zero-eight-six-niner, backslash six-nine-eight."

Another window, bordered in silver and labeled **AUTHORIZED USERS ONLY**, was laid over the first two boxes. He moved his finger to the line marked **USER TRACE**. "DiMiola, Rebecca," he said. "Account number six-three-six-eight-one-nine-zero-zero-one-seven-two-five-three, expiration date two-dash-nine-nine. Execute, please."

A message bar appeared at the bottom of his line of sight, blocking out the tiled floor of the mezzanine: **No Trace Found. Security override initiated 6-12-94 3:47 P.M.**

"Negate override," he said. "Execute backup trace."

The message changed instantly: **Override negated. No backup trace located for DiMiola, Rebecca.**

"Damn," Bass muttered. He was afraid of this. Just as the local sales rep had intimated, Rebecca had managed to crack the security codes which prevented unauthorized users from accessing Gallerie Virtual's default codes. It happened on occasion, usually when some would-be cyberpunkie attempted to go on a shopping spree, using someone else's credit number. In this instance, though, Rebecca had overridden the mall's tracer, which allowed a CybeServe investigator such as himself to track an individual's past and present movements through the Gallerie Virtual. Then, to make matters worse, she had also instructed the computer to eliminate the backup file of her movements.

This didn't look good. Bass closed the silver window, then fingered the menu item which listed Rebecca's purchases during this run and her remaining credit-line; as he had been told by the sales rep, she had only purchased a pair of running shoes from the Athlete's Foot before she had disappeared. As an afterthought, he moused the **VIEW** window, and found that the shoes in question were an expensive pair of men's Nikes, size ten. The shipping order stated that they were to be sent to Donald A. DiMiola,

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in care of the address of a St. Louis office complex.

No, this didn't look good at all. The only purchase Rebecca had made in the Gallerie Virtual had been a pair of running shoes for her father, to be sent to his office instead of his home...then she had vanished, carefully instructing the wall to delete her footprints behind her.

The message was more subtle than a handwritten suicide note, yet the intent was just as blatant.

There was only one way left to find her. Bass exited the menu, took a deep breath, then began his long walk through the shopping mall.

THE SEARCH for Rebecca Bass took many hours. Even walking in place, pantomiming an endless stroll through the Gallerie Virtual by raising his feet and putting them down on the real-life floor of the dataroom where they had just left a moment before, while the mall itself unraveled before him step by step, was eventually fatiguing. A couple of times he sat down and rested; the second time, he took off his shoes and briefly massaged his aching feet, then continued his journey in his socks.

Bass never removed his helmet and goggles, though; to do so would have meant removing himself from telepresence, and he didn't want to do that. He had to keep himself locked within Rebecca's world, this obscene and infinite teenage universe of simulated stores and fake water sculptures and digital trees. Without the convenience of a trace-pattern, his only hope was to keep walking.

Once, he heard the door of the dataroom open and he felt Evangeline DiMiola's presence behind him. He said nothing, though, and after a few moments he heard the door shut once again.

When Gary had run away into a role-playing program and Bass had gone in to find him, he had been able to play the riddle game with Gollum and thereby gain a hint as to where the boy had gone, eventually locating him within the dragon's cavern. Finding Gary had been easy, so long as the person trying to find him was familiar with *The Hobbit*. With Rebecca, though, there were no twisted subterraneans to give him vital information. All he could do was follow a sourceless, banal river of consumerism.

Yet he was not entirely without clues. He had been in her bedroom, had seen the things she had collected in real life. It was a small hunch, but it

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helped to narrow the focus of his search.

She had stuffed animals on her bed, so he visited the toy stores and walked up the long vacant aisles, passing shelves of plastic guns and games and dolls, until he found the section which contained images of Winnie the Pooh and Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny and a hundred different kinds of bears. There was nobody here, so he exited Toys 'R Us and went across the mezzanine to another teen-style clothing store, where he strode through aisles of party skirts and jumpsuits and hosiery until there was nothing left to see. Then he kept walking until he found yet another music store — his third since he had entered the mall — so he went inside and wandered past the bins of CDs containing the latest hits by the latest bands, and when Rebecca wasn't to be found there either, he left Discount Records and kept walking until something else caught his eye.

The trick was in thinking like a teenager, so he ignored the more upscale and conservative clothiers, or the places which offered fine-art reproductions and household gadgets. He passed the Museum Store and L.L. Bean and Bausch & Lomb, because there was little in them which would catch the fancy of a fifteen-year-old girl. But, at the same time, he had to remember that she was lonely and intelligent, a girl who had spent most of her years by herself. She knew computers and high-end electronics, so he visited Radio Shack and the AT&T store. She was into photography, so he went to places which sold cameras. So on through the mall, until he had covered dozens of stores which carried all these items, randomly hitting places like Walgreen's and Spencer's Gifts on the odd chance that she might wander into them.

He also remembered that she had a lot of books on her bedside shelf. She liked to read, so therefore he went into every bookstore he found — Waldenbooks, B. Dalton's, Brentano's — until, four hours and thirty-seven minutes after he began the search, the hunch paid off, and Joe Bass finally found Rebecca DiMiola.

She was hiding in the back of Mark's Books, in the children's section. As in real-life, her VR image was seated cross-legged on the floor, but this was the only tie to reality. Her telepresence was much more beautiful: her figure was fuller, her hair longer and more curly. She was wearing an old-fashioned gingham skirt which made her vaguely resemble an older Alice from the Lewis Carroll novels. Fairy tale innocence combined with some teen

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magazine version of physical perfection, as much of a disguise as her mother's makeup and *haute couture* mannerisms.

Rebecca was staring straight at a row of Dr. Seuss books on the bottom shelf, her hands folded together in her lap. As soon as he spotted her, Bass dodged behind a rack of books so that he couldn't be seen. He opened the security window on his menu and activated a real-time tracer, just in case she attempted to run away. Then he stepped out from behind the rack.

"Rebecca?" he said. "Rebecca DiMiola?"

She was visibly startled by the sound of his voice; her unchanging face jerked around toward him, and at the same moment she made as though to rise, her hands moving from her lap to push against the floor. But her real-life body had not eaten or slept for almost a full day; she was too weak to run off. Instead, she fell backward, half-collapsing on the floor of the bookstore.

"Hey, hey," he said gently. "Better watch yourself. You can still get hurt in here."

Bass took a step forward, holding out his hands to help her up, but Rebecca scuttled backward, avoiding him. "Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing here?"

Although her simulated face was incapable of changing expression, her voice, electronically filtered in his headset, was tinged with fear and anger. Bass was aware of how she saw him; his telepresence was much the same as his real self, except that he had preprogrammed it to soften the lines of his face and shorten his height, lending himself the image of a kindly Dutch uncle. He could have programmed himself to resemble anyone from Santa Claus to Mickey Mouse — with very young children, he often did just that — but in this instance, he wanted her to see him much as he really existed. Honesty was the key to everything, whether when they were in virtual reality or, hopefully, when they emerged from cyberspace.

"I'm Joe," he said. "I work for the mall. Your mom asked me to come in here and find you." He allowed himself a chuckle; all emotions he chose to display had to be verbal. "You're a hard lady to find, Rebecca."

"My mother...?" She remained still on the floor. "She sent you after me? Oh, gaawd...."

Bass took another step forward, bending over with one hand outstretched. "Here. Let me help you up and we can talk about...."

"Keep away from me!" Her voice became a high-pitched yell as she

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found the strength to scramble to her knees. "Get any closer and I'm outta here!"

From a seemingly vast distance away, Bass heard the door of the dataroom softly open once again, felt a cool draft of fresh air. Although he couldn't see her, he knew that Evangeline DiMiola had to be standing in the open doorway. Yet her daughter didn't react; she seemed to be either unaware of her mother's intrusion, or had chosen to ignore her...and Bass himself couldn't risk acknowledging the woman's untimely arrival.

Bass shrugged and let his hand drop to his side. "Okay. Fair enough. I'll stay right here." He squatted on his hips, resting his arms on his knees. "Y'know, Rebecca, your mom is worried about you...."

"Uh-huh, sure. Like, she's really torn up, right?" She was crouched on her knees and hands, like a sprinter ready to bolt at the starting gun. In her present state of agitation, she might not treadmill-run, either, but charge straight into the wall of the dataroom, possibly injuring herself. "What's the matter, she think I might crash her credit rating?"

He sighed and pantomimed scratching behind his ear. "No...no, I think she's really concerned about you, kiddo."

She laughed sullenly. "If you knew that bitch the way I know her," she said, "you'd know how stupid that sounds." She paused. "And don't call me a kid. I really hate it when people call me that."

Bass heard a sharp intake of breath from the doorway. For an instant, he was afraid that Evangeline DiMiola would say something that would break the spell...

Then the door shut, a little more loudly this time, and once more the two of them were alone.

"Sorry," he said. "I won't do that again." He sighed loudly enough for Rebecca to hear him. "Look, I'll make a deal with you. I won't try to grab you and you won't run away, okay? We're just going to talk. Fair enough?"

A moment of hesitation. "Okay," she said at last, seeming to relax a little. She eased out of her running stance. "Fair enough. Just so long as we talk and that's it."

She sat down on the floor in an ungainly heap, unwittingly allowing the hem of her quaint skirt to fall down around her thighs. She looked down at her lap, then made a pushing motion which caused the skirt to move back into place. "Whoops," she said, her giggle tinged in an uncomforting touch of

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hysteria. "Can't let you see my virtual panties, can we?"

Bass shrugged again. "Doesn't matter to me, Rebecca. I'm a little too old for you, anyway."

"Beck," she said. Her voice became insistent. "If you're going to call me anything, then call me Beck."

"Becky?"

"No, not Becky...Beck." She looked away, her changeless face moving toward the holographic display of Dr. Seuss books. "Only my mom and dad call me Rebecca. I asked them to call me Beck, but they say it sounds like I'm a gang member or something."

"Uh-huh," Bass said slowly. "Sounds like they don't listen to you very much."

"You got it." She reached out and briefly touched the cover of *Green Eggs and Ham*; a window opened in the corner of Bass's screen, listing the book's price, author, page count, plot summary, and recommended reading level. "Great book. Can't wait for the movie."

Bass touched a menu key which closed the window. She let out an irritated sigh. "Let's talk about your parents a little...."

"Let's not and say we did." Beck removed her hand from the book. She went silent for a few moments, staring straight at him, before she spoke again. "Look, Jim...."

"Joe."

"Jim, Jack, Joe, whatever you said your name was...I know you're supposed to be a shrink or something, but you and I both know you're just a neural-net system in Massachusetts, running an AI program." She laughed again, this time more bitterly. "You're pretty good. The dweeb who programmed you did a righteous job, but you couldn't pass a Turing test to save your chips, y'know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I know what you mean." Bass felt for the right pocket of his trousers, fumbled inside while Beck watched him, and found a quarter. He pulled it out, knowing that the coin was invisible to her in cyberspace, then aimed carefully and pitched it straight at her.

She jerked back a little as the unseen coin hit her in the chest. "Whuu?...what was that?"

"The quarter I just threw at you," he said mildly. "How's that for passing a Turing test, Beck?"

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"Christ on a crutch...." Her hands searched the lap of her dress until she found the invisible yet tactile coin; she raised her right hand, the non-virtual coin pinched between her thumb and forefinger. "Oh my gaaawd," she whispered. "You're real! You're in the room!"

"Yep. Sure am. Real as they get." Bass raised his hands and waved them around. "Listen, Beck...I hate to tell you this, but this store, this whole mall...it isn't real. None of it's real, no more than the stuff you see in the movies is real. Sure, it's a good fake, but...."

"I know it isn't real!" she yelled, her voice shrill with frustration. Her hand lashed toward him and Bass felt a sharp pain as the quarter struck him in the forehead. "Jesus Christ, you think I'm stupid? Of course I know it's not real, gimme a break...!"

"Okay, all right." Bass rubbed at his forehead. "That really hurt, you know."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to hurt you...."

She didn't sound very apologetic, but at least the fact of his real-life presence had been proven to her. It was a good start. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll live. Look, Beck, the point is, you're trying to run away inside this thing. That, or maybe you're trying to kill yourself...."

"I'm not trying to kill myself!" she snapped, standing up suddenly as her anger rose again. "Gaawd, I don't have to listen to this shit!"

Bad move. He had rushed her and she was retaliating against him. Time to backpeddle. Bass didn't rise to his feet; he lowered his voice, struggling to remain easygoing and unconfrontational despite her hostility.

"Please, Beck," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Just sit down, okay? We've got a deal, don't we?"

"What deal?" she demanded.

"The deal we just made a minute ago." Joe forced himself to remain steady. She was on the verge of a breakdown; getting mad at her or being condescending wouldn't help. "Hey, I just want to talk things through with you, that's all."

Bass silently cursed the present state of cybernetic technology which only allowed her face to be a mask. It was remarkable how much therapy depended upon seeing the patient's facial expressions; without such subtle clues, he was little better off than a Catholic priest hearing confession from the other side of a screen. If she ran off now, he would be able to trace her wherever she went in cyberspace, now that the computer had reestablished a fix on her position...but the opportunity to communicate with her would

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be lost, and he might not be able to regain her trust again.

"Uh-huh. Right." She sounded tired. So many conflicting emotions in so few minutes. "You're just here to help li'l ol' me...."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm here to help li'l ol' you." It was his turn to do a little begging. "C'mon, Beck, give yourself a break. Just sit down again. Please?"

Rebecca hesitated. The crucial moment was here; either she would trust him, or she was gone for good. Bass said nothing. The decision belonged to her alone.

"Okay," she said very quietly. "Maybe we can talk." Then she sat down on the floor again, hugging her knees between her arms.

"Thank you," Bass said. "I'm sorry I offended you."

"That's okay," she said weakly. Her voice sounded choked; he heard a faint sniffle, and her right hand raised to rub against her nose. "No, I...I mean, you didn't...aw, shit...."

He said nothing, only sat still and waited. "Yeah, maybe I wanted to kill myself," she went on, her voice a dry rasp now. "I mean, not really, but...I dunno, I thought maybe if I came in here, stayed in the mall long enough, maybe someone would start to pay attention to me...."

"Like your folks?"

"Yeah, like my parents..." Her head bent forward as she rubbed her hands against her face; the sniffling grew louder. "My dumb parents. I mean, my mom...my royal bitch mother, she's always with her friends, at the club or out shopping for shit, and when she's home I'm like a piece of furniture she forgot to take to Goodwill or something...."

"And your father? Your dad?"

There was a harsh, brittle laugh. "Never see him. Haven't seen him in months. He's always away...Russia, Germany, Japan, Australia, some stupid country. I try to get him on the phone, but he doesn't call back. Just buys me something instead."

Her mask-like face rose from her hands. "I mean, where do you think this place came from? I thought if I asked for something really expensive, he might notice me...but naw, he just paid for it. One more thing for his little girl back home."

"Hmm." Bass nodded his head. "Then how do you really feel about this place? The mall, I mean."

Beck said nothing for a few moments. Her face moved back and forth, up and down, her eyes searching the peripheral view of artificial reality. "I...I dunno," she said at last. "I kinda think it sucks." She looked back at him.

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"You're right, y'know? It looks really dumb, when you stop and think about it. All you do is dress up and buy stuff and shit."

"Uh-huh. Know what you mean." Bass carefully scooted closer to her; this time, she didn't move away, not even when he held out his hand.

Instead, she reached and grasped his palm, their gloves encircling one another's in a grip whose warmth could not be simulated by a computer. For several minutes, they simply held onto each other; nothing was said, because nothing needed to be said.

"This place gives me the creeps," she said at last.

"Don't ask me," he replied. "I just work here."

She sniffled and laughed a little. "I've got an idea," Bass said. "Let's get out of this joint, then we can talk about this some more."

"Yeah...okay. That sounds good to me." She raised her free hand to an invisible place above her forehead and her fingertips danced in midair. Then she winked from sight, although Bass continued to feel her right hand grasped within his own.

He took a long, deep breath and took one last look around the bookstore before he reached up to the menu bar and touched the EXIT key.

THEY REMAINED in the dataroom for a little while longer, sitting on the floor across from each other. Rebecca had removed her helmet and Bass had taken off his goggles and headset, so for the first time they saw each other as they really were. They had a conversation, but the girl did most of the talking: she spoke of her frustrations, she got mad a few times, she cried some more, and when she was done, Joe Bass did his best to help her put the pieces back together.

When they were through, he sent Beck to her room to take off the datasuit and take a long shower, advising her to put something in her stomach, then go straight to bed. He gave her his card and told her to call him if she ever needed someone to talk to; Beck smiled, sniffling some more, and bashfully thanked him. Then she left the dataroom, hopefully for the last time.

Bass used a cellular phone to call for a cab and to arrange airline reservations for an earlier flight back to Boston, then he took off his equipment, unjacked his computer from the room's terminal, and began packing them away in his case. When Evangeline DiMiola appeared once again in the doorway, he didn't turn around.

"I just wanted to thank you," she said. She hesitated, then added: "For

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bringing my daughter back to me."

"I got her out of the mall, Ms. DiMiola," he replied, still not looking at her. "Bringing Beck home is still your problem. You're going to have to work that out with her."

She didn't respond, saying nothing until he had closed the briefcase and stood up. Bass noticed that her eyes were red-rimmed, her makeup was gone. She looked away, visibly embarrassed; her right hand fumbled inside the pocket of her jumpsuit, came out again with a small wad of dollar bills. "That's for your help, Mr. Bass," she said quietly. "Please take it."

Bass looked down at the money and shook his head. "I don't need a tip, ma'am. If you want to do something useful with it, use it to dismantle this room. That's what Beck told me she wants you to do."

She blinked quickly, not quite understanding what he had said. "Beck?" she asked. "My daughter?"

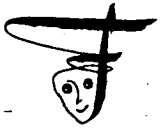
"Yes. Your daughter. She wants to be called Beck." He hesitated. "And if I were you, I'd start listening to her more often...or you're going to see me again."

He didn't wait to hear what she had to say. In fact, all he really wanted just then was to get the hell out of her house. Bass stepped around Evangeline DiMiola and walked down the hall, down the stairs, through the foyer and out the front door, out to where a cab was already waiting by the curb.

As the cab cruised through the leafy suburbs of St. Louis, making its way through the late afternoon traffic to the inner belt and the airport, Bass sat in the back seat and silently watched the houses go by. He thought of all the children he had met: Matt, Angie, Stephen, Raoul, Beth, Karen, Jackson, Jennifer...and Rebecca, sometimes called Beck.

She wouldn't be the last case he would handle. As much as he wished otherwise, Bass knew that there would still be another shopping mall to enter, another lost kid to find. He knew this now; if he had forgotten it before, then he had been reminded.

All the children, all their pain, in all the imaginary worlds. Lost in the shopping mall.



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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

ROBOTICA '93

WE ARE NOW seven years away from the twenty-first century. Where are all our robots?

A faithful reader of SF from the 1940s and '50s might be surprised to learn that we're not hip-deep in robots by now. By this time, robots ought to be making our breakfasts, fetching our newspapers, and driving our atomic-powered personal helicopters. But this has not come to pass, and the reason is simple.

We don't have any robot brains.

The challenge of independent movement and real-time perception in a natural environment has simply proved too daunting for robot technology. We can build pieces of robots in plenty. We have thousands of robot arms in 1993. We have workable robot wheels and even a few workable robot legs. We have workable sensors for robots and plenty of popular, industrial, academic and military interest in robotics. But a workable robot brain remains beyond us.

For decades, the core of artificial-intelligence research has involved programming machines to build elaborate symbolic representations of the world. Those symbols are then manipulated, in the hope that this will lead to a mechanical comprehension of reality that can match the performance of organic brains.

Success here has been very limited. In the glorious early days of AI research, it seemed likely that if a machine could be taught to play chess at grandmaster level, then a "simple" task like making breakfast would be a snap. Alas, we now know that advanced reasoning skills have very little to do with everyday achievements such as walking, seeing, touching and listening. If humans had to

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"reason out" the process of getting up and walking out the front door through subroutines and logical deduction, then we'd never budge from the couch. These are things we humans do "automatically," but that doesn't make them easy — they only seem easy to us because we're organic. For a robot, "advanced" achievements of the human brain, such as logic and mathematical skill, are relatively easy to mimic. But skills that even a mouse can manage brilliantly are daunting in the extreme for machines.

In 1993, we have thousands of machines that we commonly call "robots." We have robot manufacturing companies and national and international robot trade associations. But in all honesty, those robots of 1993 scarcely deserve the name. The term "robot" was invented in 1921 by the Czech playwright Karel Capek, for a stage drama. The word "robot" came from the Czech term for "drudge" or "serf." Capek's imaginary robots were made of manufactured artificial flesh, not metal, and were very humanlike, so much so that they could actually have sex and reproduce (after exterminating the humans that created them). Capek's "robots" would probably be called "androids" today, but they established the general concept for robots: a humanoid machine.

If you look up the term "robot" in a modern dictionary, you'll find that "robots" are supposed to be machines that resemble human beings and do mechanical, routine tasks in response to commands.

Robots of this classic sort are vanishingly scarce in 1993. We simply don't have any proper brains for them, and they can scarcely venture far off the drawing board without falling all over themselves. We do, however, have enormous numbers of mechanical robot arms in daily use today. The robot industry in 1993 is mostly in the business of retailing robot arms.

There's a rather narrow range in modern industry for robot arms. The commercial niche for robotics is menaced by cheap human manual labor on one side and by so-called "hard automation" on the other. This niche may be narrow, but it's nevertheless very real; in the US alone, it's worth about 500 million dollars a year. Over the past thirty years, a lot of useful technological lessons have been learned in the iron-arms industry.

Japan today possesses over sixty percent of the entire world population in robots. Japanese industry won this success by successfully ignoring much of the glamorized rheto-

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ric of classic robots and concentrating on actual workaday industrial uses for a brainless robot arm. European and American manufacturers, by contrast, built overly complex, multi-purpose, sophisticated arms with advanced controllers and reams of high-level programming code. As a result, their reliability was poor, and in the grueling environment of the assembly line, they frequently broke down. Japanese robots were less like the SF concept of robots, and therefore flourished rather better in the real world. The simpler Japanese robots were highly reliable, low in cost, and quick to repay their investment.

Although Americans own many of the basic patents in robotics, today there are no major American robot manufacturers. American robotics concentrates on narrow, ultra-high-tech, specialized applications and, of course, military applications. The robot population in the United States in 1992 was about 40,000, most of them in automobile manufacturing. Japan by contrast has a whopping 275,000 robots (more or less, depending on the definition). Every First World economy has at least some machines they can proudly call robots; Germany about 30,000, Italy 9,000 or so, France around 13,000, Britain 8,000 and so forth. Surprisingly, there are large numbers in Poland and China.

Robot arms have not grown much smarter over the years. Making them smarter has so far proved to be commercially counterproductive. Instead, robot arms have become much better at their primary abilities: repetition and accuracy. Repetition and accuracy are the real selling-points in the robot arm biz. A robot arm was once considered a thing of loveliness if it could reliably shove products around to within a tenth of an inch or so. Today, however, robots have moved into microchip assembly, and many are now fantastically accurate. IBM's "fine positioner," for instance, has a gripper that floats on a thin layer of compressed air and moves in response to computer-controlled electromagnetic fields. It has an accuracy of two tenths of a micron. One micron is one millionth of a meter. On this scale, grains of dust loom like monstrous boulders.

CBW Automation's T-190 model arm is not only accurate, but wickedly fast. This arm plucks castings from hot molds in less than a tenth of a second, repeatedly whipping the products back and forth from 0 to 30 miles per hour in half the time it takes to blink.

Despite these impressive

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achievements, however, most conventional robot arms in 1993 have very pronounced limits. Few robot arms can move a load heavier than 10 kilograms without severe problems in accuracy. The links and joints within the arm flex in ways difficult to predict, especially as wear begins to mount. Of course it's possible to stiffen the arm with reinforcements, but then the arm itself becomes ungainly and full of unpredictable inertia. Worse yet, the energy required to move a heavier arm adds to manufacturing costs. Thanks to this surprising flimsiness in a machine's metal arm, the major applications for industrial robots today are welding, spraying, coating, sealing, and gluing. These are activities that involve a light and steady movement of relatively small amounts of material.

Robots thrive in the conditions known in the industry as "The 3 D's": Dirty, Dull, and Dangerous. If it's too hot, too cold, too dark, too cramped, or, best of all, if it's toxic and/or smells really bad, then a robot may well be just your man for the job!

When it comes to Dirty, Dull and Dangerous, few groups in the world can rival the military. It's natural therefore that military-industrial companies such as Grumman, Martin Marietta and Westinghouse are extensively involved in modern military-robotics. Robot weaponry and robot surveillance fit in well with modern US military tactical theory, which emphasizes "force multipliers" to reduce US combat casualties and offset the relative US weakness in raw manpower.

In a recent US military wargame, the Blue or Friendly commander was allowed to fortify his position with experimental smart mines, unmanned surveillance planes, and remote-controlled unmanned weapons platforms. The Red or Threat commander adamantly refused to take heavy casualties by having his men battle mere machinery. Instead, the Threat soldiers tried clumsily to maneuver far around the flanks so as to engage the human soldiers in the Blue Force. In response, though, the Blue commander simply turned off the robots and charged into the disordered Red force, clobbering them.

This demonstrates that "dumb machines" needn't be very smart at all to be of real military advantage. They don't even necessarily have to be used in battle — the psychological advantage alone is very great. The US military benefits enormously if it can exchange the potential loss of mere machinery for suffering and damaged morale in the human enemy.

Among the major robotics ini-

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tiatives in the US arsenal today are Navy mine-detecting robots, autonomous surveillance aircraft, autonomous surface boats, and remotely-piloted "humvee" land vehicles that can carry and use heavy weaponry. American tank commanders are especially enthused about this idea, especially for lethally dangerous positions like point-tank in assaults on fortified positions.

None of these military "robots" look at all like a human being. They don't have to look human, and in fact work much better if they don't. And they're certainly not programmed to obey Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics. If they had enough of a "positronic brain" to respect the lives of their human masters, then they'd be useless.

Recently there's been a remarkable innovation in the "no-brain" approach to robotics. This is the robotic bug. Insects have been able to master many profound abilities that frustrate even the "smartest" artificial intelligences. MIT's famous Insect Lab is a world leader in this research, building tiny and exceedingly "stupid" robots that can actually rove and scamper about in rough terrain with impressively un-robot-like ease.

These bug robots are basically driven by simple programs of "knee-jerk reflexes." Robot bugs have no centralized intelligence and no high-level programming. Instead, they have a decentralized network of simple abilities that are only loosely coordinated. These robugs have no complex internal models, and no comprehensive artificial "understanding" of their environment. They're certainly not human-looking, and they can't follow spoken orders. It's been suggested though that robot bugs might be of considerable commercial use, perhaps cleaning windows, scavenging garbage, or repeatedly vacuuming random tiny paths through the carpet until they'd cleaned the whole house.

If you owned robot bugs, you'd likely never see them. They'd come with the house, just like roaches or termites, and they'd emerge only at night. But instead of rotting your foundation and carrying disease, they'd modestly tidy up for you.

Today robot bugs are being marketed by IS Robotics of Cambridge, MA, which is selling them for research and also developing a home robotic vacuum cleaner.

A swarm of bugs is a strange and seemingly rather far-fetched version of the classic "household robot." But the bugs actually seem rather more promising than the standard household robot in 1993, such as the

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Samsung "Scout-About." This dome-topped creation, which weighs 16 lbs and is less than a foot high, is basically a mobile home-security system. It rambles about the house on its limited battery power, sensing for body-heat, sudden motion, smoke, or the sound of breaking glass. Should anything untoward occur, Scout-About calls the police and/or sets off alarms. It costs about a thousand dollars. Sales of home-security robots have been less than stellar. It appears that most people with a need for such a device would still rather get themselves a dog.

There is an alternative to the no-brain approach in contemporary robotics. That's to use the brain of a human being, remotely piloting a robot body. The robot then becomes "the tele-operated device." Tele-operated robots face much the same series of career opportunities as their brainless cousins — Dirty, Dull and Dangerous. In this case, though, the robot may be able to perform some of the Dull parts on its own, while the human pilot successfully avoids the Dirt and Danger. Many applications for military robotics are basically tele-operation, where a machine can maintain itself in the field but is piloted by human soldiers during important encounters. Much the same goes for undersea robotics, which, though not a thriving field, does have niches in exploration, oceanography, underwater drilling-platform repair, and underwater cable inspection. The wreck of the *Titanic* was discovered and explored through such a device.

One of the most interesting new applications of tele-operated robotics is in surgical tele-operations. Surgery is, of course, a notoriously delicate and difficult craft. It calls for the best dexterity humans can manage — and then some. A table-mounted iron arm can be of great use in surgery, because of its swiftness and its microscopic precision. Unlike human surgeons, a robot arm can grip an instrument and hold it in place for hours, then move it again swiftly at a moment's notice without the least tremor. Robot arms today, such as the ROBODOC Surgical Assistant System, are seeing use in hip replacement surgery.

Often the tele-operated robot's grippers are tiny and at the end of a long flexible cable. The "laparoscope" is a surgical cable with a tiny light, camera and cutters at one end. It's inserted through a small hole in the patient's abdominal wall. The use of laparoscopes is becoming common, since their use much reduces the shock and trauma of major surgery.

"Laparoscopy" usually requires

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two human surgeons, though; one to cut, and one to guide the cable and camera. There are obvious potential problems here from missed communications or simple human exhaustion. With Britain's "Laparobot," however, a single surgeon can control the camera angle through a radio-transmitting headband. If he turns his head, the laparoscope camera pans; if he raises or lowers his head it tilts up and down, and if he leans in, then it zooms. And he still has his hands free to control the blades. The Laparobot is scheduled for commercial production in late 1993.

Tele-operation has made remarkable advances recently with the advent of fiber-optics and high-speed computer networking. However, tele-operation still has very little to do with the classic idea of a human-shaped robot that can understand and follow orders. Periodically, there are attempts to fit the human tele-operator into a human-shaped remote shell — something with eyes and arms, something more traditionally robotlike. And yet, the market for such a machine has never really materialized. Even the military, normally not disturbed by commercial necessity, has never made this idea work (though not from lack of trying).

The sensory abilities of robots are still very primitive. Human hands have no less than twenty different kinds of nerve fiber. Eight kinds of nerve control muscles, blood vessels and sweat-glands, while the other twelve kinds sense aspects of pain, temperature, texture, muscle condition and the angles of knuckles and joints. No remote-controlled robot hand begins to match this delicate and sophisticated sensory input.

If robot hands this good existed, they would obviously do very well as medical prosthetics. It's still questionable whether there would be a real-world use and real-world market for a remotely-controlled tele-operated humanlike robot. There are many industrial uses for certain separate aspects of humanity — our grip, our vision, our propensity for violence — but few for a mechanical device with the actual shape and proportions of a human being.

It seems that our fascination with humanoid robots has little to do with industry, and everything to do with society. Robots are appealing for social reasons. Robots are romantic and striking. Robots have good image.

Even "practical" industrial robots, mere iron arms, have overreached themselves badly in many would-be applications. There have

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been waves of popular interest and massive investment in robotics, but even during its boom years, the robot industry has not been very profitable. In the mid-1980s there were some 300 robot manufacturers; today there are less than a hundred. In many cases, robot manufacturers survive because of deliberate government subsidy. For a nation to own robots is like owning rocketships or cyclotrons; robots are a symbol of national technological prowess. Robots mark a nation as possessing advanced First World status.

Robots are prestige items. In Japan, robots can symbolize the competition among Japanese firms. This is why Japanese companies sometimes invent oddities such as "Monsieur," a robot less than a centimeter across, or a Japanese boardroom robot that can replace chairs after a meeting. (Of course one can find human office help to replace chairs at very little cost and with great efficiency. But the Japanese office robot replaces chairs with an accuracy of millimeters!)

It makes a certain sense to subsidize robots. Robots support advanced infrastructure through their demand-pull in electronics, software, sensor technology, materials science, and precision engineering. Spin-offs from robotics can vitalize an economy, even if the robots themselves turn out to be mostly decorative. Anyway, if worst comes to worst, robots have always made excellent photo-op backgrounds for politicians.

Robots truly thrive as entertainers. This is where robots began — on the stage, in Mr. Capek's play in 1921. The best-known contemporary robot entertainers are probably "Crow" and "Tom Servo" from the cable television show MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000. These wisecracking characters who lampoon bad SF films are not "real robots," but only puppets in hardshelled drag; but Crow and Tom are actors, and actors should be forgiven a little pretense. Disney "animatronic" robots have a long history and still have a strong appeal. Lately, robot dinosaurs, robot prehistoric mammals, and robot giant insects have proved to be enormous crowd-draws, scaring the bejeezus out of small children (and, if truth be told, their parents). Mark Pauline's "Survival Research Laboratories" has won an international reputation for its violent and catastrophic robot performance-art. In Austin, Texas, the Robot Group has won a city arts grant to support its robot blimps and pneumatically-controlled junk-creations.

Man-shaped robots are romantic. They have become symbols of an

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early attitude toward technology which, in a more suspicious and cynical age, still has its own charm and appeal. In 1993, "robot nostalgia" has become a fascinating example of how high-tech dreams of the future can, by missing their target, define their own social period. Today, fabulous prices are paid at international antique toy collections for children's toy robots from the '40s and '50s. These whirring, blinking creatures with their lithographed tin and folded metal tabs exert a powerful aesthetic pull on their fanciers. A mint-in-the-box Robby Robot from 1956, complete with his Space Patrol Moon Car, can bring over four thousand dollars at an auction at Christie's. Thunder Robot, a wondrous creation with machine-gun arms, flashing green eyes, and whirling helicopter blades over its head, is worth a whopping nine grand.

Perhaps we like robots better in 1993 because we can't have them in real life. In today's world, any robot politely and unquestioningly "obeying human orders" in accord with Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics would face severe difficulties. If it were worth even half of what the painted-tin Thunder Robot is worth, then a robot streetsweeper, doorman or nanny would probably be beaten sensorless and carjacked by a gang of young human unemployables. It's a long way back to yesterday's tomorrows.

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Jonathan Lethem's short fiction has appeared in Aboriginal SF, Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Interzone, Journal Wired, Pulphouse: the Hardback Magazine, *and* Universe 2. *Some of his short stories have been finalists for the Nebula award, and reprinted in Gardner Dozois'* Year's Best Science Fiction *anthology.*

"Hugh Merrow" was inspired by Wendy Lesser's book, His Other Half: Men Looking at Women through Art. *The short story marks Jonathan's first appearance in* F&SF.

Hugh Merrow

By Jonathan Lethem

AMBROSE MARR BROUGHT me the mail on the Planet of the Archbuilders, picking his way twice a month through the crumbled ruins at the edge of my emigrant's garden. If I was out with my easel painting the sky I could see him coming for five minutes before he arrived.

I invited him in for a drink, as I had the first three times he visited. He was the only person I saw apart from the couple that flew over every week in their hovercraft, selling groceries and supplies. And apart from the Archbuilders. I wasn't lonely, though. I was happy to be alone. Or at least I had been unhappy before I had been alone.

Ambrose had a letter from Ralph and Danielle, which made me impatient to have him leave again. But I put the letter on the table, washed my hands in turpentine and then soap, and poured us each drinks.

"Somebody told me who you were," he said, smiling.

"I'm Hugh Merrow," I said. "I think I mentioned that the day we were introduced."

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"That you're not just any painter," he said, ignoring me. "You're famous. People know your name. Just goes to show you how long I've been living with the Archbuilders."

"You don't have to come to the Planet of the Archbuilders not to know my name," I said, truthfully.

"You paint portraits. You painted the President."

"Yes," I admitted. I'd often wished I hadn't done that, paint the President.

"There's nobody here to paint," he said.

I nodded my agreement, and, thankfully, he left it at that.

I was here to paint, but not portraits. I'd left portraits on Earth. I'd exhausted portraits. I was here to find out what else there was in me. I might paint the sky, the strange yellow and brown sky, I might paint the ruins, crumbled stone and grout veined with crawling plants, or I might paint my garden. I had done some of each so far. Or I might be working my way toward painting abstractly. I hoped so. I'd painted abstractly in school, many years before. I was pretty sure that I thought the greatest work, the most serious work I could do, would be abstract. I wanted a chance at greatness — as opposed to celebrity.

I'd started painting portraits when I fell in love with Alison Black, at the end of my school years. My thesis work was a batch of portraits of Alison, a last-minute swerve toward representation that unsettled my professors, who feared I'd renounced exploration, tiptoed away from the brink.

The brilliance of the portraits — they were brilliant — kept my professors, and me as well, from being sure. My degree was with honors. Still infatuated, I painted Alison again and again, clothed and unclothed, until one day I'd painted her into Renee Devour's gallery on East 81st Street, and Renee got me my first commission. Initially my fame was based on my ability to paint women — rich women, usually old, rich women. I painted their beauty, I tried to find Alison in them, and when they looked at the portraits they felt loved.

I'm also a very nice looking man. The generic fantasy about a painter and his model is a very stimulating one, frankly. I know that was a part of it. Old ladies with too much money would much rather give it to a young, pretty man who makes them feel adored than to their relatives.

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When Alison left I threw myself into my work, in several senses. Between commissioned portraits I painted nudes, and what was a fantasy between me and my old ladies became a reality with my paid models. I went from modeling-stand to easel and back, the result being a series of nudes that dripped sex.

These Renee sold to rich, horny old men. I only hoped Alison visited the gallery before they were all gone.

Soon enough I was famous, arguably the first American painter to build a reputation on portraiture since Alice Neel, unless you counted Warhol, or Chuck Close. The first truly respected *commission* portraitist since who knows — Whistler? Rembrandt?

Which meant that soon enough I was painting famous men instead of rich women. I was good enough that it didn't show when the fun went out of it. Or perhaps it's that the sort of people I was painting couldn't tell. My signature ensured the painting's quality — didn't it?

By this time I was in love with Danielle — who was the wife of my new friend Ralph Theater.

I LOOKED UP at the two portraits on my wall as I walked back in to where I'd left the letter on the table. Ralph and Danielle — they were the only portraits I'd packed in the small collection I'd brought to the Planet of the Arch-builders. The others were the best of the college abstracts.

I opened the letter — the envelope was in Ralph's hand, and so was the letter, but he wrote from the collectivity of the marriage.

We miss you, it said. They were *fine* but *the New York summer* had left them *enervated.* They gossiped about *Ben and Neera's divorce* and told me that *Renee is such a bitch with you gone.* They regretted *the way things were at the end* when *communication could have been so much better.* And so on. Signed *Ralph and Danielle,* in Ralph's hand.

At the bottom were a few words from Danielle. *Thinking of you. Sorry for all the craziness. D.*

The Archbuilder who cleaned my house was named Hardy, Resolute. They all had names that translated as a pair of adjectives; I'd also encountered Sincere, Vigorous, and Lucky, Eloquent, and Ambrose Marr claimed to know

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a dissolute Archbuilder, an abuser of the local equivalent of malt liquor, named Diffident, Lachrymose. A culture of translators, omnilinguists, they all spoke beautiful, expressive English. There were thousands of Archbuilder languages, and most of the Archbuilders spoke a few dozen of them; they stopped adding new ones only out of boredom. But English was something new, and a craze for it had swept the planet. It might have been the only language every single Archbuilder had in common.

Hardy, Resolute moved through my room, cradling a bundle of my laundry, her lobal fronds waving softly. Archbuilders were a duckbilled-platypus combination of shell and fur, dressed in paper clothes; I found them fascinating, and had to work not to stare. Their legs were double-kneed, and their knees were double-jointed, so that they seemed to swim across the ground, and when Hardy, Resolute reached for something on the floor she did it by melting into a puddle of soft limbs.

This day she stopped in the middle of the room and looked at the two portraits on the wall: Ralph and Danielle. Her fronds flattened back against her head.

"Who?" she asked.

"Friends," I said.

"You painted them." It was just short of being a question.

"Yes."

"Why are they different?"

What did she mean? I allowed myself to study her face for a moment, the crested, glossy cheekbones, the large, furred lips that could shape my language so easily. Deceptively easily — we were speaking across a vast gulf of difference, of alienness. And I was not experienced with the Archbuilders. I had come here to be alone.

"Different?" I said.

"This — " A single frond uncurled to indicate my portrait of Danielle, " — your affection is evident here. Your glowing regard. Where in the other you are absent. Your eye retreats."

I looked at my portrait of Ralph. I was very happy with that picture. But could I see it? When I looked I saw Ralph, not the painting.

"The one fills the viewer with your loving presence," said Hardy, Resolute. "The other leaves me no such place to inhabit. I can look, but I cannot dwell in the space of your gaze. Your eye here divides, restricts.... I

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am sorry — "

I shook my head. Her apology implied insult, and so, irrationally, I felt the insult, and simultaneously the shame of not resisting anger. How silly. What could my Archbuilder maid know about my painting—or about Ralph?

"Great artists are invisible," I said. "They reshape your eye, so that their own presence cannot be detected. Degas' bathers — his genius is that those women are truly alone, that he's giving you what you could never see yourself — the women alone with themselves — "

I stopped, feeling even more foolish; Hardy, Resolute couldn't know Degas.

Why did I feel so defensive? Ralph, I suppose. Some excess of emotion there, transferred to the issue of the painting.

But Hardy, Resolute rolled on, understanding the reference implicitly, perhaps. "I think your genius is otherwise, excuse me. It seems that what you tell of your care for the sitter is what you have to give. You cannot leave your subject alone with themselves, as 'Degas.' When you try — " A frond waved at Ralph again " — an insincerity, a muddle."

"Okay," I said, now wanting a stop to it.

Hardy, Resolute emptied her armload of laundry onto a chair. She straightened her paper dress with a flicker of curved, glossy claw, and looked up at me, her soft gray eyes bordered by the fronds.

"Would you portray me?" she asked.

"Something's wrong," said Danielle, after the first time we made love, which was also the night I finished my first portrait of her.

"What?" I said, startled. Then, seeing that it was more a question: "Nothing's wrong. No."

"You're distant," she said. "It's like you're already finished with me. Or you didn't find what you wanted after all."

I'd wanted Danielle since the day I met them, together, at an opening at Renee's for Ralph's sculpture. I'd been "in love" with her almost as long, since the three of us began spending so much time exclusively together, eating, drinking, gossiping, sharing secrets.

My womanizing had tailed away at the start of our friendship, to be replaced with chaste fantasizing about Danielle, and hot-headed, envious contemplation of their sex together, while I went home alone or even slept

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in their extra room.

It made for the longest abstinence of my adulthood — a sort of temple I was building to Danielle. And now she and I had entered that temple together at last. Now at last we lay naked together.

I shuddered. "This is what I want," I said.

MY FIRST THOUGHT, of course, was to say no. No portraits. There was nothing more for me to discover there, in another's face, or body, or presence, or in my response to that other presence. I was cynical; I'd exhausted people and their portrayal. Portraiture was out.

But I'd never painted an Archbuilder. No human had, as far as I knew. This was tantalizing. Challenging. And I saw it suddenly, added to my list of accomplishments: Exoportraiture. It was vaguely Gauguin-esque. Or like Wyeth's Helga paintings; a cache of Archbuilder portraits could emerge, from after the time of my supposed renunciation of portraiture, forcing the critics to eat their words. I was always ready to fantasize about controversy, and acclaim.

And was it really a question of portraiture? The Archbuilder looked more like a still-life. It wasn't flesh I'd be painting, but fur and shell and those fabulous lobal tendrils, so much like the stalk and bud of a calla lily. I thought of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who'd painted human heads comprised of fruit and meat and flowers. But of course that would be wrong, to search to find a human expression in amidst the Archbuilder's features. That would be the trap. Instead I would have to search for *Archbuilder* expression. I would have to learn to see all over again. And then to show what I'd seen. And yes, of course, it was a matter of portraiture.

But perhaps it wasn't so much portraiture I'd renounced as it was other human beings (I certainly hadn't had to travel all the way to the Planet of the Archbuilders not to paint portraits *per se).* So why not paint the Archbuilder? If it was a way of tricking myself, stalling before launching into abstraction, at least it would be a brief, and novel one.

"Yes," I said. "But now do what I pay you to do, please. No more talk about painting. I have nothing clean to wear. We'll set a time for you to pose."

Hardy, Resolute closed her large gray eyes, not blinking, but squeezing them at me like a cat. Then she smiled, and I wondered whether the

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Archbuilders had learned to smile the way they'd learned English, or whether it was an expression that was native to the planet. The reflexivity between human and Archbuilder, self and other, would be my subject now, I saw. Could not help but be my subject.

Then her fronds tucked back and she seized up the load of laundry and wordlessly left the room.

The Archbuilders were placid, by the time we found them, though their myths were all of war, ambition and conquest. They greeted us like long-lost brothers. They adored earthly things; would trade hoards for trinkets, indentured themselves to us gladly. Education and religion were mingled for them, and their scholars and mystics were indistinguishable, so that their studying Earthly culture was indistinguishable from their worshipping it.

They'd named themselves for past achievements; the ruins, the cathedrals and aqueducts and Watts towers that lay crumbled everywhere; if you showed an interest they would produce holographic records and pass them around, like clucking grandparents showing baby pictures. They built nothing, lived in hovels atop the ruins.

They had once learned to change the climate of their planet, and the changes in the climate changed the Archbuilders. New plants had grown, vines which covered the stone arches, the food had grown plentiful, the storms had passed, the seasons had mellowed, and the temperament of the Archbuilders had changed accordingly. The methods of climate control were then lost or abandoned.

They had no painters anymore; the paintings they had were like the ruins, from the past.

They never laughed, and the sound of laughter made them uncomfortable.

They kept no animals, for food or companionship.

This was everything I knew about the Archbuilders. Not enough, as it turned out.

We arranged to work each evening for an hour, in the yellow dusk after sunset. I put her in front of a window, like the Mona Lisa. I wanted her in the natural light of the planet and with the ruins and vines behind her.

The first night, without my asking, she peeled her paper garment to her

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waist. Surprised, I turned: Ralph and Danielle, behind me, were bare-shouldered. I realized I'd unconsciously decided on a shoulders-up portrait; in taking her cue from the paintings on the wall, Hardy, Resolute had read my mind.

Her chest was flat, with glossy plates hidden in the swirls of fur. I'd never seen an Archbuilder even half-undressed before. I thought of Danielle, shyly pushing her bra-straps off her shoulders, then hastened the thought away. I began sketching on the pad I had mounted in place of my canvas; for the first night I planned only to draw, to relax my hand and eye, and also to relax my model. I wanted to see my way past certain likely first impressions, wanted to move through the predictable, fundamentally uninteresting shock of portraying the alien the first few times.

Fast then, I told myself; no second glances, no second thoughts. With the flat side of my charcoal I roughed in a gray impression of her head and shoulders, the long, tucked-away tendrils on top, picking out the gleam of her cheeks and muzzy darkness of her mouth. In a minute the drawing was overworked, imbalanced; I tore it aside, and started another.

Five such shadow-encounters later, I let myself look into her eyes. The beginning of the complication, the back and forth that made a portrait something other than a still-life or a landscape or even a nude. And in this case, the bridge to the alien that I would be the first to build.

The stillness of her eyes, their depth and moisture; that was a challenge. Not to produce an alien version of Margaret Keane's sad-eyed clowns and children. I would have to downplay them, in fact. I felt myself begin the calculations. It was good to be at work. Another sketch: I glanced up, and back to the pad, and up again. Her eyes followed me. To the drawing, away, again and again, my hand never still, knowing its place well enough that I could look up more than not.

Then my hand stopped. Her lobal fronds had expanded. Slightly, but unmistakably, they'd swollen away from the curve of her skull. I thought of a cat's tail moving — did she know, did she feel that they'd moved? Spell broken, I glanced up at the sky behind her. The light was sneaking away.

At my watch, then; almost time.

I tore away the sheet, and the eyes I'd drawn seared into mine for a moment before the torn upper edge of the paper curled over to conceal them. Fine: I'd caught something there. Move on. I began again, this time sketching

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in the line of the enlarged fronds against the dying light of the window. Wanting to catch that difference. Back, then, to her eyes, to the way they defined the space between us. Let her eyes tell the shape of the room. I worked furiously for the last minutes. As the shadows fell the gleam of her cheeks and eyes grew dimmer, and the soft void of her mouth grew larger and larger.

Good, something's there on the page. A gravity. Now destroy it, painter. You're just warming up.

"Time," I said, and added the sheet to the pile on the floor.

The next night I started the painting. I scrubbed a shadow impression of her features onto the primed canvas with stained turpentine, denying myself a line at first, squinting to keep from favoring edges over mass. I held myself to blunted brushes, working big, chopping out the shapes of that fantastic, noseless, surreal face; paint the light, I reminded myself.

Then, as I began to pull the details forward, working with a lighter shade on top of the stain, I saw it again: her fronds expanded.

I ignored it, and painted them larger, and moved on. To her eyes. Down, up: I watched her flicker downward with me the first few times I moved from her eyes to my canvas, though she couldn't see the canvas. A common slip. And then, as with so many others, I saw her catch herself, and stop falling for the trick, and from then on her eyes were on me steadily whenever I looked up.

That meant I could paint them in, and I did, but not fully. I didn't want to have to paint the rest of her in around the finished intensity of her eyes. I looked long enough to stir myself, to know what I meant to capture there, and what depths *my* eye would have to go to capture it, but I left it intentionally uncaptured. Just met it, and painted on: a flash of the sunset light on the shiny crest of her cheeks.

Her tendrils swelled, and swayed loose from their tucked-back position.

"You're moving," I said.

"This is involuntary, excuse me," she said, without otherwise breaking the pose. The tone — if I could judge it — was noncommittal.

My hand and eye were alive now, and I didn't stop them from filling in the distant glowing ruins in the window behind her. Then back to the sun on her shoulders. It was a moment before I spoke again. "Involuntary?"

"It is a response," she said simply.

"Should I paint you — as you are now?" I paused. "Unfolded?"

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Now she paused. Maybe the first time since I'd met Hardy, Resolute that her words, her English, had not rolled out unhesitatingly. "I am somewhat more likely to remain thus comfortably, if — " Now she turned her head tremblingly, losing the pose. "If the quality of your attention to me remains thus."

"The quality of my attention?"

She moved again, quickly now, the tremble vanished. "I am sure now that the portrait of me that you paint will be a fine one," she said softly. She regained her place, slipped back so that she matched the image forming on my canvas. Except of course for her fronds, which were displaced and swollen. The plant-like flesh of them glowed now, from within — or was that the failing sunlight?

They looked beautiful, and I wanted to paint them as they were. "Sit still," I said, and, dipping my brush in paint and then in turp, so that I could draw without dragging through the paint already present, I indicated the elegant tendrils in their new place about her head.

And then the hour was over.

The next evening Hardy, Resolute stepped over to the canvas before taking her place at the window.

I looked over her shoulder. The portrait was all in brown and gray; a smoke impression. Above them, framed by the window, the loose tendrils.

"I paint the light," I explained. "Not the subject, but the light on the subject."

"Yes," she said. "And at your best I think you also paint your own responses, your emotions, as they flicker like the light over the seated one."

"It's all mixed up for you, isn't it?" Danielle had said to me midway through the first portrait. *"Sex and painting."*

"What do you mean?" I blurted out now, exactly as I had that far away time with Danielle.

"Ah, they are invisible to you," said Hardy, Resolute. "That is their very force. You only show them to others, never to yourself."

"I don't paint things that are invisible," I said.

"That is certainly true," she said and, moving away from the painting, began rolling away the top of her paper outfit.

We began, and I quickly dissolved my annoyance with our conversation

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in my work. I'd become obsessed with the portrait. During that day I'd come back to stare again and again at the rudiments, and to project their fulfillment. I saw it all, and I was impatient to have it down in paint; the unsentimental depth of her eyes, the unpitiful yearning softness of her mouth, the mad expressiveness of her tendrils, and the way her eyes were watching an alien painter look at her and bridge the gulf; it was all there to be caught, and I knew I was ready to catch it. But not without the sitter in place; I hadn't touched my brushes until she was back.

Her tendrils were in the wrong place. Impatiently, without thinking, I strode out from behind my work and went to adjust them, as I had with the arms and legs and necks of a million models. So, before I'd considered it fully, they were in my hands.

Soft-fleshed but firm, and very, very warm. I moved the two I held, and they throbbed under my grasp. Even as I set them where I thought they belonged the others were in motion around me, first drawing back, then reaching out to brush my arms. I felt the exhalation of Hardy, Resolute's breath against my throat, and stepped back, releasing the fronds.

"Hugh Merrow," she said. Her eyes were squeezed closed, and her mouth was softly wide. I was suddenly aware that I wanted to touch it, to feel her lips. Maybe I would have to feel them to paint them, I thought. Maybe I just wanted to.

"Have I done something wrong?" I said.

"No," she said. She bent slightly, and her tendrils gently raked my chest.

They had no orgasm; that was another thing to know about the Archbuilders. There wasn't a central point of focus, either: Hardy, Resolute taught me to scrabble at her chest and cheek plates with my nails, to fondle and suck her lobal fronds, to scissor her backside between my thighs and squeeze. I learned to measure her breathing, to raise her to that long plateau where the throttled gasps came from her throat, where the beating of her pulse was audible. She taught me how to make love to an Archbuilder.

I, in time, shyly taught her to suck my penis into that great furred mouth, while her fronds tangled around my buttocks, testicles, and stomach. I helped her understand my coming; how to anticipate it, how to stall it if that was what she wanted. I taught her how to make love to a man.

That first night, though, we lay together without accomplishing so

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much. We fell there under the shadow of my unfinished painting and discovered each other, found intimacy without words; we merely felt our way by touch over an invisible bridge that spanned stars. Were we the first? Probably not. My painting an Archbuilder was likely more distinctive than my fucking one. But it seemed that for me the one was necessary for the other. Hardy, Resolute certainly seemed to think that. Perhaps that was what she found lacking in my portrait of Ralph: that I hadn't *fucked* him.

I'd asked Danielle about Ralph, a question about their life together. I didn't expect any extraordinary reaction.

She backed away from me, out from under the covers, and sat up against the wall beside the bed. I watched through the semi-darkness as she slipped her panties back on.

This was our fifth, and last, time together in bed.

"Hello?" I said.

"Maybe you should be with *him*," she said acidly.

"What?"

"Sometimes I think this is between you and Ralph," she said. "Like some frat-boy thing, sharing a woman because you can't — " She broke off.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I found myself groping for my own clothes, for protection. If she were getting dressed I would not be left naked.

"All you ever do, when we get alone, is ask about Ralph. You're obsessed with his reactions, what he would think, what it's like between us, his body even. You seem to want him to find out. And when we're all three of us together you're so directed toward him, you're all energized. I just — sometimes I think you got the wrong one of us." She put her head down. "It's like you and me are just a displacement of that — energy — in you. Because you can't let it be — the other way."

I was silent.

"I mean do you have any idea how much you ask? How many different things you say that all mean the same thing?"

I felt suddenly that I wanted to hit her, that if I were someone other than myself I would have. Just to make her stop. Instead I dressed myself, quickly and efficiently. She watched.

"Hugh — "

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"What an idiotic gambit," I began, my tone stinging, but it was a bluff, pure instinct. I had nothing to follow it with. I turned my back to her and sat on the edge of the bed, lacing my shoes, though we were in my house — it was she who would have to go.

Another beat of silence, and then I heard her move across the bed toward me. My body cringed. She put her arms around me and turned me back to her. I lay back stiffly, and she clung to me, naked except for her underpants. My dressing had the reverse of the effect I'd hoped, somehow; she seemed stronger, undressed, seemed more like the one who belonged there, in that bed in the dark, seemed, with her lovely breasts spilling over my shirt, like a symbol of healthy, natural desire, while I in my clothes was unsexed, emasculated, like some dapper, alienated fag who didn't know what to do with a naked woman.

"Hugh," she whispered. "Don't freak out. It's okay. I — it's nothing strange. Just to you. It's so normal, it's everywhere. Please. Look at me."

I made myself look at her.

"You — you like us both," she said, a little desperately. "That's the truth. You're with me, I know that, I can feel that. I'm just saying the other is there too. That's all. Sometimes someone you're with can see something, and I just, it just freaked me a little that you couldn't see it too, that I had to say something. But — it doesn't matter. You can do what you want to do. Why don't you — touch me again."

That I couldn't do. I was frozen in horror. Her solicitous, even occasionally pathetic tone convinced me so much more thoroughly than had the earlier, accusatory one. I could see that I was listening to a person who believed what she was saying. That it was not some bizarre, conflicted bid for attention, or a frantic attempt to eliminate a nagging but unlikely source of insecurity. I felt patronized, and horrified to be.

Now, pressed together, an even darker silence fell over us.

"Listen," she said. "With all you know about me and Ralph — there's one thing. I was afraid of losing you both. But Ralph is like you, both ways, he wants — both things. I mean, that's from before we were married. But he told me. I told him not to tell you, that I could tell you would hate it, that you were phobic, that you'd get distant because it was distasteful to you. So you wouldn't know, because I was afraid. I could tell."

She hung on my silence for a while, and then said: "You're not like that,

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Hugh, are you? Phobic, I mean."

That's when I told her to leave.

Sorry for all the craziness, she'd written at the bottom of their first letter to me, here, on the Planet of the Archbuilders.

WE MET EACH night for seven nights after the first, and some of the time she sat and composed her tendrils while I worked on her portrait. Mostly we lay together and made love. At first we didn't speak at all. Then we spoke to instruct one another. Hardy, Resolute taught me Archbuilder words for the parts of her body.

But we never said more than we had to, and when the stillness and silence prevailed I would dress and go back to the easel, or to the bathroom or kitchen. Some nights Hardy, Resolute would leave without saying good-bye.

And we always started as we had at first: she moving up to the window, me distractedly mixing my paints, fussing at my easel.

The eighth night she came in with another Archbuilder. Taller than she was, and without the lobal tendrils; a male. They were otherwise identical.

"Curious, Agreeable would like to see your painting," she said.

"It's not finished," I blurted. "But I don't mind — "

Curious, Agreeable stepped over to my easel. "Hello," he said.

"Hello." I stuck out my hand. "Hugh Merrow."

He held my hand and nodded. "I understand that it is unfinished," he said. "However, are you pleased with the work so far?"

"Yes. Very pleased."

"Hardy, Resolute is a satisfactory model?"

I shuddered. Was this a jealous husband? Could I have cuckolded an Archbuilder? Was I about to experience Archbuilder revenge?

"Yes," I said. "Very satisfactory."

"Curious, Agreeable is my companion," said Hardy, Resolute, somewhat indecipherably. It could have been a warning, but from her tone she might as well have been oblivious. "He has been eagerly interested in the unfolding of our project."

"Will you paint other Archbuilders, Hugh Merrow?" asked Curious, Agreeable. His eyes lingered on mine.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I hadn't planned to paint any,

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originally."

"I see."

There was an awkward silence—awkward for me, anyway. Then Hardy, Resolute said: "We had hoped that you would not mind if Curious, Agreeable were to stay and observe."

I nodded, my throat dry. "That's fine."

So Hardy, Resolute and I went to our places, and Curious, Agreeable took a seat against the wall, midway between us, and right under my portrait of Ralph.

I painted, trying not to think, or look over at her "companion." When I failed to keep from looking, there was nothing to see but a male Archbuilder sitting with his head cocked, his soft legs braided together, his eyes wide.

I told myself I would stop as soon as I could fairly claim the light was gone. Until then it was a chance to work, albeit under the oddest conditions. Exoportraiture, I thought wryly: a learning process.

Hardy, Resolute's fronds expanded.

Knowing what it meant, I reddened, and hoped that Curious, Agreeable didn't know what *that* meant.

I switched my attention from her features to the sky behind her, hoping to quell her response by withdrawing the direct attention. I knew by now how acutely sensitive she was to my gaze. I made my brush busy scrubbing out a cloud that wasn't there today, and roughing in the new cloud that was.

"Are you not going to go to Hardy, Resolute?" asked Curious, Agreeable.

"What?" I said.

"Tonight will you not be making love together again?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Perhaps it would not be customary for you in my presence."

"No," I said, reeling. "It would not be customary. For me." I looked at Hardy, Resolute for help but she appeared to offer none. Her fronds were as full and flushed as I'd seen them. "Would it be — customary — for you?"

"It would not be a question of custom," said Curious, Agreeable. "We no longer have painting, nor the customs that accompany the act."

"Ah," I said.

"For this reason, among others, I was very much hoping you would share this fine, rare experience with me."

"Make love — in front of you?"

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"Make love *to* me, to both of us, I had hoped. And also paint my portrait."

I saw Ralph and Danielle just once after that disastrous last night she and I spent, before leaving for the Planet of the Archbuilders. I had not yet made up my mind to go, and the last visit was part of the decision.

Through the course of the evening I gradually got the impression that they'd discussed the situation. That not only had Danielle confessed her infidelity, but that they'd somehow miraculously embraced the fact of it, made it a part of their private compact. And then moved on, to a shared interest in the question of my sexuality, my ostensible compulsion toward Ralph. Even further, I gleaned that they might have decided to cultivate me for some new pairing, or tripling. That they might think to make use of me for *their* pleasure as a couple, and at the same time patronizingly assist me in "finding myself."

That my seduction of Danielle hadn't destroyed them was a blow to my ego. It hurt to think of it recounted, incorporated, made small between them.

That they had me pegged as a fag was merely revolting. As was Ralph's wanting me — if I was right in sensing that he did. I wasn't sure, of course. Nothing was explicit. Implication hovered.

I had to bear the ambiguity — it certainly wasn't possible for me to ask about it.

So I bore it, the sadness and ambiguity and disgust. I sat and drank and watched what had become of our lovely friendship, and marveled again at what lust and misunderstanding could make and unmake, and at how little people knew of one another.

And then I said good-night, and tried not to see the disappointment on their faces.

Was this my test, then? Curious, Agreeable and Hardy, Resolute sat and watched me, waiting for an answer, not knowing how they mocked my past, the very life I'd so recently fled. I gazed back at them, and then, stalling, looked down at the painting on my easel.

I should have felt a native revulsion — as I had, with Danielle — but instead I was intrigued. Challenged. Perhaps the situation was alien enough to insulate me from those feelings. The absurd degree of strangeness, coupled with the Archbuilders' absurd certainty of the connection with my painting,

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created an absurd sense of freedom.

It suddenly seemed an opportunity. I wanted to break Ralph and Danielle's hold on me, wanted to break the spell of our last time together, and my fleeing.

And I wanted her. As much as before, or more. Each evening had been better than the last, and I craved her now. I could want the threesome if only to touch her again. But it was more than that: I wanted Curious, Agreeable to see us do it, wanted him to see how *well* we did it.

And if the arrangement appealed to Hardy, Resolute, and I assumed it must, then I wanted it for *her*.

I put down my brush and stepped around the easel.

The Archbuilders took their cues from me. I directed myself toward Hardy, Resolute, and the result was that the two of us pleasured her together, covering her with our bodies, competing, species against species, to prove the better lover. I didn't snub Curious, Agreeable, whose body overlapped mine, his soft legs caressing my buttocks and back, but I never turned and approached him directly, never kissed his mouth, never sought out his pleasure. I was relieved to find no penis beneath his paper clothes, and I didn't try and discover what there might be instead. Following my lead, he attended to Hardy, Resolute; we both burnished her glowing cheeks, we both sucked and kneaded her fronds, until she gasped and said it was too much. Then Curious, Agreeable fell back, and watched as Hardy, Resolute turned to me. At the end I came in her mouth; Curious, Agreeable may have been touching me too, by then, but I ignored him.

Afterwards, at Hardy, Resolute's insistence, I put her portrait aside and sketched out the beginnings of a portrait of Curious, Agreeable on a fresh canvas.

Ambrose Marr came again the next afternoon, and when I invited him in he stared at the painting, nearly finished now, of Hardy, Resolute. It hung on the wall opposite the portraits of Ralph and Danielle.

"Look at that," he said.

I did as he said and looked. I had been glancing at it all day, seeing my lover, and my work. The portrait was splendid.

"That's incredible," he said. "I didn't know you were doing this."

"I hadn't planned to."

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"It's really great," he gushed. "It looks so — I don't have the words. But it's like — the eyes, they're so real."

"She's beautiful," I said. It was a way to acknowledge the praise without heaping on more myself. I also meant it.

"She?"

"The Archbuilder woman," I said, not understanding his confusion. "The one I painted; I didn't make her up. She's beautiful, don't you think?"

"She?"

"Yes," I said, a bit impatient with this postman.

He snickered. "That's a male, Hugh."

I opened my mouth to speak, to contradict him, but nothing came out.

"The one without the headgear's the female," he went on, still amused, not noticing my distress.

"That's ridiculous — " I managed, just.

"I guess it's an easy mistake. They don't use the pronouns much themselves. Always like hearing the sound of their own names, I guess."

My mind raced back of course, but I had no memory of being told, here or on Earth. There was only my own assumption, at the beginning.

"Their bodies — " I said.

"Yeah, pretty much the same, except for the penises."

"Penises?"

"The fronds, you know. I mean, I guess you don't. Those things — " he pointed at my picture — "are the sex organs, among other functions."

Sex organs, yes. I didn't need to be told *that*. "Penises?" I said again.

"Fingers, decorations — you know, plumage — and penises. Yeah. The female takes it in through the mouth. The males are sort of hermaphrodites, in that way, having both. But only the females can conceive through the mouth."

I was unable to speak.

"I mean, what does it remind you of, Hugh?" Ambrose Marr looked a bit embarrassed for me — though he couldn't really know the scope of it. "I mean, you painted them all erect like that."

"They're not ashamed," I said, and now, unavoidably, I turned red.

Ambrose Marr relaxed again, and laughed. "No, they sure aren't."

I spent the rest of that day looking from my painting of Hardy, Resolute to my portraits of Ralph and Danielle.

Penises, I thought. I touched — and painted — erect penises. I laughed,

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because there was nothing else to do. Then I wept with the shame and the confusion, and as I wept away the shame and confusion I wept even harder with the regret. And all the time I looked up at the three portraits.

It took a while for me to stop fighting myself, but when I did I had to conclude that in the company of the other two the picture of Ralph was distinctly lacking. And that, in light of what I'd learned that morning, it was rather *needless* that it be.

I developed a sudden, powerful compulsion to go back to Earth and try painting Ralph again.

In fact, I knew I *had* to.

But I didn't leave for another two weeks. That night the Archbuilders returned, and I made love to them again, took Hardy, Resolute's tendrils into my mouth, and then I worked on Curious, Agreeable's portrait. In those two weeks I finished both my Archbuilder's portraits, and made love to them, separately and together, many times. Then I said good-bye to them, and Ambrose Marr, and my garden on the Planet of the Archbuilders.

And good-bye, for the moment, to my ambitions — or were they pretensions? — to abstraction. Portraiture was suddenly enough, almost more than I could handle. It was abstraction that now seemed like the clever avoidance. Just as the Planet of the Archbuilders was charming, peaceful, and far too safe. My work, the hardest work I could think to do, was back on Earth, and it was portraits, pictures of eyes, hands, and bodies — *men's* eyes, hands, and bodies.

I would paint Ralph, and get it right this time. Paint him and more, perhaps, but paint him at least.

I considered packing the Archbuilder portraits to go back to Earth, to show them, but decided that the resultant fuss would be too much distraction. So I gave them to their subjects — or rather, let me say I gave them to their *sitters*. My Archbuilder paintings were as close as I'd come to a complete self-portrait. For that reason my other choice, to keep them and *not* show them, to fetishize them, would be to suggest I thought I could never come closer.

To give them away was to swear I would.

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K.D. Wentworth just sold her first novel to the Del Rey Discoveries line of books. Her short fiction has appeared almost everywhere, from Writers of the Future Volume 5 *to* Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. *"Sacred Ground" is the first of several appearances in F&SF.*

Sacred Ground

By K. D. Wentworth

FATHER TIERNEY was shocked to see how many had arrived before him — humans everywhere, sprawled asleep on the cracked stone steps, lingering in the shadows amidst the massive, enigmatic carvings, wandering in and out of the ancient Sirhinese temple as though they owned it. The breeze carried a faint hint of sulfur, chill and dank.

Just outside the low barrier of piled white stone, he stood aghast at the sight of so many humans here on this officially Protected world. He had known from the reports that there would be some, but his Vatican VII superiors had vastly underplayed the problem, if indeed they had ever understood it at all. Hundreds of so-called pilgrims had invaded this place, seeking the miraculous visions that were currently being rumored throughout Compact Space.

Down in the middle of the square, a hollow-cheeked woman pressed skeletal hands to her face. "See?" Her voice rang out. "Do you See?" Every

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head turned, watching the air with her. "It's *him*, it is!" She threw herself onto the stone-block pavement, arms outstretched, her black hair fanned about her head and shoulders like a tarnished halo. A sigh shivered through the crowd as they gathered about her prostrate body.

Father Tierney recognized the obsessive pattern, obviously another Sacred Well of Lyrell all over again. He turned away, his mouth bitter, his hands shaking. Why had Vatican VII sent him here? They had to know it was pointless to send a priest who had lost his faith to investigate miracles.

He glanced aside and met the deep-brown eyes of a stocky woman with the olive-gold skin and broad cheekbones of an Amerind.

"Common as raindrops." She studied him for a moment, her gaze frankly wary. "Visions, I mean. They have them all the time down there." She reached for his hand, then shook it with a firm, quick motion. "Dalthea Redbird — Doctor. I'm a member of the First Contact mission to Sirh. You must be the one sent by the Church."

Down in the crowded temple square, a child of ten or so pointed up into the silver Sirhinese sky and wept. The crowd moaned in response.

His throat tightened and he had to look away. "Father Tierney," he said. "Vatican VII assigned me to see if I could be of any help here."

"The only way you could help would be to convince them that they don't see anything." Hands on her hips, she shook her head. "And that'll never—" She broke off and narrowed her eyes. "You're not *Cullen* Tierney, the anthropologist?"

"Yes." He eased down on the low barrier of interwoven white stones, wincing at the pain in his arthritic knees.

"I've read your work!" A smile crinkled up the sun-lined corners of her eyes and he upped his estimate of her age to about fifty, still a good twenty Standard years less than his own seventy-two. "You did wonderful work on the Trepaki kinship systems."

"Yes, well...." He let his eyes drift from her face to the mindless, milling crowd. ". . . that was a long time ago." *And someone else*, his thoughts finished, *someone younger who still believed that life had a purpose, that a structure underlay everything and that a man's work actually meant something.*

"No wonder they sent you." Some of the stiffness eased from her shoulders. "Maybe we will be able to save our work with the Sirh after all."

"The Sirh. . . ." Tierney glanced around at the thin-soiled land with its

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underlayer of protruding white rock, but there was no sign of the nonhumanoid natives. "Where are they?"

"They're afraid." Frowning, she took his arm and pulled him away from the barrier. "Even though this is apparently their holy of holies, they won't venture this close to humans."

"But they'll talk to you?"

"No." Her voice was low. "They won't talk to any of us since the killings."

"Killings." Something deep inside his chest shriveled.

"Three days ago." Her voice was flat. "A group of Sirh came down to the temple. The pilgrims killed two of them and drove the rest away, and I'm afraid if they come back, it will happen again."

"No one ever Sees until they enter the grounds." She set a cup before him and filled it to the brim with steaming mint tea. "Then it begins."

"Mass hysteria." He warmed his hands on the mug, letting the familiar fragrance lull him. "An old, old human story when it comes to miracles."

"I don't think so."

He read fear in the tightened lines around her mouth. "Why not?"

"Because I've Seen too, and I definitely had no desire to." Seating herself across the table from him, she avoided his eyes while she blew on her tea.

"Exactly . . . what did you see?"

"Don't ask," she said, her voice abrupt. "Let's just say it felt very real and you couldn't get me back in that temple for — anything."

"But you sent for me."

"I want all unauthorized personnel off this world. They're ruining the relationship we'd only begun to establish with the natives." She sipped her tea for a moment. "Did you know that the Sirh have only one temple on this whole world? Or that, as far as I can tell, they have nothing we would recognize as religion — no liturgy, no priests, no theology, just this one place?"

"Unusual." His mind whirled, sending him for a moment back to that great cauldron of a desert on Lyrell, *the deep well of blue water under the towering needle-trees, the expectant Lyrran eyes that had watched him approach, that had trusted. . . .*

With a wrench, he pulled himself back. He couldn't help anyone by wallowing in a wrong that could never be undone, but he could try to

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prevent it from happening again. Perhaps that was why he had been sent, weakened vessel though he was, because he had seen the havoc human religious hysteria could wreak and would be prepared for it — this time.

"I'll have to examine the site, of course." He glanced around the small kitchen. "I assume the shuttle crew off-loaded my equipment."

"It's in the storeroom." She took another small sip of tea. "And I'll do what I can to help. I requested a Patrol ship too, before I contacted Vatican VII, but they said a few hundred illegal immigrants were a low-class priority. They'll drop by, the next time they have an 'important' mission in this quadrant."

"Which could be years from now." Upending his mug, he drained the last of the cooling tea, then tossed the mug into the recycling bin in the middle of the table. "I've heard that one before."

"And more people will come." She met his eyes, then looked away. "I'm afraid that's a certainty."

Not again. . . . His hands trembled as he straightened his high black collar. "I'll go back first thing in the morning to take some readings."

"I'll walk as far as the barrier with you." Her voice was low. "But I won't set foot in that temple, not ever again."

The red sun rode above him in a glimmering silver sky, strange, and yet no stranger than that of a dozen other worlds he'd walked upon during his career as an archaeologist in the First Contact Corps, a career of which he had once been proud, had once thought was of some value. Many in the Bureau had thought it old-fashioned and even dangerous to have a so-called "man of the cloth" serving on such expeditions, but he had prided himself on open-mindedness, on accepting other cultures' values as meaningful, on being above the ancient Christian rituals of proselytizing and evangelizing. The truth has many forms, he had said to those who asked, all beautiful, all valid in the eyes of God.

But that had been before the slaughter at the Well.

Walking beside him, Dalthea Redbird's footsteps crunched on the gravel path. "It was a shuttle pilot," she said abruptly, her voice brittle in the crisp morning air. "He sneaked onto the grounds, even though we had identified it as a religious site and out-of-bounds. We didn't find him until the next day. He was wandering around naked, raving some nonsense about a 'Lord of Light.'"

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The path took a last twist and they were there, gazing down on the temple square where the humans lounged as though they had built it themselves. He watched their smudged, pinch-cheeked faces and wondered if they ever bathed and where they found adequate food and water for a group of their size.

"Even after treatment, he continued to talk about his experience as though it had really happened. We didn't believe him, of course, but the Sirh never brought the matter up, and so when the shuttle left in a few days, we put it out of our minds. Just a minor incident, nothing more, until he returned a year later with twenty or so 'pilgrims' who insisted on Seeing for themselves."

Tierney hung the recorder around his neck, for readings in case he should have a glimpse of some apparition, which of course he would not. Nothing out there looked down on Man and the other beings that crowded the habitable worlds so far discovered. Nothing planned or had a purpose; there was only chaos and disintegration and entropy. He knew that now.

"I'll wait out here." She bit her lip. "Just — don't stay down there too long. You'll never leave if you stay too long."

Looking back at her, he saw how the high cheekbones showed tight through her skin.

"You probably think I'm crazy." A red tinge seeped up her neck. "But you haven't Seen yet."

"I should be about an hour." He switched the recorder on. "Two at the most, then we'll go back and assess the data." The moist, chill wind buffeted his face as he stepped over the white-stone barrier and picked his way back down the rocky decline.

Caught up in their private visions, none of the rapt, introspective faces looked up as he descended onto the temple grounds. He stopped beside a woman in faded blue rags, who clutched the hand of a half-naked toddler as she pointed at the air above their heads. In return, the child cooed and babbled to the nothingness, its arms stretched out in a plea to be picked up.

Wrinkling his nose at the stench of urine and unwashed bodies, Tierney took a series of readings, then moved on to a gray-haired man, who might have been his age or a little younger. Seated on a huge bulbous carving, the man stared at an empty place on the plaza while tears trickled through the dirt crusted on his face.

"What is it?" Tierney asked quietly.

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"The — heavens above you shall be as unyielding as — as — as bronze, and the earth beneath —" The man's forlorn voice cracked with emotion. "— will be as — iron."

Tierney laid a hand on the other's shoulder, feeling the sharpness of bones through the man's shirt. "Why don't you go back to the Expedition compound and get something to eat?"

As slowly as a flower tracking the sun, the man's eyes turned to focus upon his face. "They will forget about me and break the contract that I have made with them. Then my anger will flame out against them and I will abandon them." The emaciated body trembled beneath his hand. "Bless . . . me, Father, for . . . I. . . ." His eyes rolled back and he crumpled to the ground.

Dropping the recorder, Tierney knelt down to feel for the man's pulse, but a second later, the man stirred and pushed him away.

As Tierney stood up, he heard a loud, authoritative voice calling from inside the temple.

"Render therefore to all their dues. . . ."

Romans — he recognized the words although the exact chapter and verse designations eluded him at the moment. The speaker had at least read the Bible, might even be a Christian.

As though summoned, the crowd bolted inside the temple, pushing and fighting to get through the door at the same time.

". . . tribute to whom tribute is due . . .," the unseen man continued, "custom to whom custom. . . ."

Following them inside, Tierney ran his fingers across the rough, dark, surprisingly dank stone. He switched on his coldtorch and shone it ahead. Massive blocks of cut stone, piled one upon the other, formed a broad passageway. Farther down, he saw a few recessed, darker rectangles which might be doorways.

". . . fear to whom fear. . . ." The words rang out, echoing through the temple.

Sliding his hand along the cold stone, he edged forward, seeking that deep, powerful voice. He rounded the first doorway and entered a huge, high-ceilinged chamber dominated by a man with glittering brown eyes, a stern, strong jawline, and white brows that crowded together over his arching nose.

". . . honor to whom honor," the man finished, his voice confident,

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resonant, accustomed to being obeyed.

Tierney flashed the light around the chamber, and found it empty, save for the two of them and a large cistern of water set low into the stone floor. "What are you doing down here in the dark?"

"Waiting for you." The man folded his arms across his massive chest, and Tierney realized that everything about him was massive — his forearms, nose, teeth, and white beard that flowed down his chest, and especially that echoing voice.

"You shouldn't be here." Picking up the recorder, Tierney began to take readings. "This temple is property of the Sirh and off-limits to humans."

"What are you doing here then?" The man stepped closer, studying him as well. "You look almost human to me."

"I've been posted from Vatican VII to look into the alleged miracles on this site." Holding the recorder out, he studied the displays. A chill shivered through him; according to the readout, the man didn't exist.

"For I have become a king in my father's place, and I have built the temple!" The other's voice rang out in the enclosed space, vibrating the walls and the floor and the very air until Tierney felt it in his bones.

The shadows stirred, and he saw voluptuous, dark-haired women swaying in the corners, dancing in place to unheard music, their diaphanous red robes swirling around the soft full curves of their bodies. Men with close-cropped hair and swelling muscles stepped out of the shadows to lift golden, horn-shaped cups in salute.

Trembling, he cleared his throat. "Go back to the Expedition compound and we'll see about getting you off-world."

A muffled titter rippled around the room, growing larger and louder until he clamped his hands over his ears and backed away. "Stop it!" The breath rasped in his chest as he glared at their amused faces. "This is serious!"

"Of course, it is." The bearded man nodded and the shadow-people nodded with him. He stretched his hand out and a burst of blue-and-gold flame danced upon the water in the cistern. "It was serious on Lyrell too."

Lyrell. . . . The name spun in the air before him, catching the light . . . plunging him back into madness. . . . *A thousand crisped bodies lay before the Sacred Well and still the Lyrrans came on, armed with only farming implements, the sand-littered ground rumbling with their footsteps while the human invaders sat on the edge of the Well and burned them down*

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with blasters.

"And you watched from the nearest sand dune and did nothing."

With a convulsive shiver, Tierney looked around at the stone chamber and the bearded man, the burning water. "There — there was nothing I could do, short—"

"Short of killing them." The bearded man cocked his head. "And you couldn't have done that, not you, not a man of the cloth." He threw his head back and laughed.

Hands clenched, Tierney felt hot tears stream down his cheeks. It had been his fault, as much as any human's, perhaps more. He had known what they meant to do. If he had blocked their way that morning, given his life to protect the Lyrrans, then his death might have at least brought him peace. Instead, since that day of ashes at the Well, he had known only pain.

The water-fed fire blazed up to fill the chamber. "And now?" The bearded man smiled and his flame-illuminated face was terrible. "What do you think? Shall we have fire again, or something different?" His face grew brighter, and Tierney realized that his hair was flame, as well as his beard and eyebrows — and eyes, living, breathing flame. He jerked back into the wall with bruising force. The coldtorch dropped from his hand as he fumbled for the door. He didn't want to see anymore. He couldn't—

Loud and terrifying, the voice followed him. "Behold, the Lord thy God has set the land before you: go up and possess it!"

Emptiness blossomed under his fingers; he stumbled after it, arms out, running . . . running. . . .

He crashed into a wall so hard that he fell to his knees, then groped along the clammy surface in the frigid darkness, hands outstretched, scraping his skin on the rough stone, unable to think or breathe.

Emerging without warning into the broad expanse of the temple plaza, he knocked down a slender young girl, who sprawled beside him, not even seeming to notice. The air wheezed in his chest as he lay there on the stone pavement and struggled for breath.

"Father!" someone called. "Father Tierney!"

Covering his head with his arms, he hunkered down into a tight ball of misery. They would never let him forget. His fault . . . he should have done something . . . all those bodies, crisp as burned logs falling to ashes in the grate . . . ashes, that was all he had left now, all he would ever have —

A hand gripped his shoulder, the nails digging into his skin. "Father, you

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have to get out of here!"

And he glanced up through his tears into the terrified face of Dalthea Redbird.

I WAS WRONG — obviously." Tierney's hands shook as he forced the glass of brandy to his lips. He felt empty, as though something had punched holes in him and drained the last of his strength. "It's not just hysteria. There's definitely a causal agent down there, some sort of physical phenomena, perhaps an abnormality in the underlying rock or the air, a gas vent, something. . . ."

Dalthea Redbird watched him from the other side of the metal dining hall table, her lips pressed together so tightly they were white.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" He reached out and took her clenched hand in his; it was cold and rigid. "Someone else can help me recalibrate my equipment for tomorrow."

Her eyes turned to the sight of his hand touching hers, then she flinched away. Her chair creaked as she shifted her weight to the edge. "There is no one else."

He had a sudden flash of realization: he had seen no one but her in the compound since he'd arrived. He took another sip of brandy and let it burn down his throat. "Where are the rest of the Expedition personnel?"

"You've seen them." Her voice was dull. "Down in the square and the temple with the pilgrims."

"Some of those people —?"

"What's left of the First Contact group." Her dark-brown eyes seemed to unfocus. "Except for me, and I'm not that far from being down there myself, especially after going back onto the grounds today."

"What —" He moistened his lips. "What did you See when you went to the temple before?"

She turned on him, her face angry and haunted. "I told you that I didn't want to talk about that!"

"How can I help if you won't tell me?"

Her silence lasted so long that he thought that she wouldn't tell, or more likely, couldn't.

"I saw — the sacred hoop." Her voice wavered. "The sacred circle where all places intersect, the center of everything. The Sirhinese temple is located in the center of the universe itself where all things are known and

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understood, the most sacred of all land, right here on Sirh." She shook her head. "We lost that long ago. Earth has no untouched land now, but it seems to still exist here, pure, speaking in a voice that the People can understand." She ground the heels of her hands over her eyes. "You can't know what that means. It's been hundreds of years since Amerinds last heard that voice, since we had any identity as a people. And all I have to do is send word back to my contacts in Compact Space."

"But you know it isn't real."

Her dark eyes gazed at nothing for a long moment, reflecting the overhead light. "Does that matter as long as it feels real?"

"It makes a big difference." He pushed back from the table. "Do you want to be deluded like the rest of those poor fools, or do you really want to find out what's going on?"

"I've already tried." She blinked wearily. "I've taken readings, soil samples, air samples, investigated the whole spectrum of possibilites and found nothing. I don't know where else to look."

Tierney stood. "First thing tomorrow, I want you to take me to the Sirh."

The vast darkness was unsettling. Something had been torn from his arms, leaving him drifting, aching. A question formed in his throat but he lacked the strength to voice it.

Then he saw fire everywhere . . . shimmering up from the ground, blazing out of the sky, seeping out of the massive stones of the Sirhinese temple . . . and from his own body. Looking down, he could even see the fire coursing in his veins, supplying each individual cell with a spark of brilliance, making him part of something much larger, returning a sense of wholeness he had thought he'd lost forever back on sad Lyrell.

Someone touched him and the images shivered into pieces. He bolted upright in the claustrophobic bunk, fighting the blanket twisted around his body and Redbird's hand on his arm.

"Sorry." She released him and stepped back. "I didn't mean to startle you, but we'd better go. The Sirh will leave for their fields soon." She handed him a steaming mug of tea.

He nodded, trying to slow his galloping heart.

She leaned against the opposite wall and studied him through narrowed eyes. "You were dreaming, weren't you?"

He lifted the hot mug while in the back of his mind the fire still danced.

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"I dream every night of what I saw in the temple." She pushed a shock of dark-brown hair threaded with gray out of her eyes. "And it haunts me during the day — the drums, the chants, the pull of the land. Whenever I close my eyes, it's there, waiting."

"I'll get to the bottom of this." The cup clanged on the floor as he set it down. "I have to. I can't let it happen again. Give me ten minutes and I'll meet you in the kitchen."

She jerked her head in a tense nod and left him to dress.

The tiny compound kitchen smelled of blueberry muffins when he entered, slinging a translation unit and a recorder over his shoulder.

Redbird tossed him a hot muffin. "We have to hurry."

Juggling it from hand to hand, he trailed her through the corridors out into the pale, red-tinged sunlight. The early-morning air was cold and bitter with traces of sulfur and other less familiar gases. He chewed the muffin as their feet crunched over the rock-strewn ground, his mind going back to Lyrell and the mad rush of pilgrims after a few humans had reportedly been healed by water from one of the Lyrrans' Sacred Wells. Nothing had been promised there, and still the invading humans had slaughtered thousands to take the Well, no matter that it had belonged time out of mind to the natives. He knew that as word got out about this site where everyone had visions, no price would be considered too high to pay.

Redbird stopped at a narrow track beaten into the yellow-brown dirt that led up a rocky ridge. She shoved her hands deep into her pockets. "Their settlement is just over this rise. They live in cavelike adobe huts built against the cliffs."

He reached for the translator. "Aren't you coming?"

"They connect my scent to the killings because I was there that day." A red flush crept up her neck. "You'll have better luck without me. Ask for Pirreee." She made the name sound like the shrill call of a gull from old Earth. "It's not going to be easy, even with the translator — so much of their language is communicated through posture and movement. I've applied for a visual array for the translation unit, but it hasn't come yet. You may get only 50 percent of the intended meaning, maybe less." She turned abruptly and started back toward the compound, her breath a white plume in the chill early-morning air.

A low warble caught his attention and he looked up. A long-necked,

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long-legged Sirh appeared on the slope, its body covered in off-white down accented with bands of vivid purple. It was vaguely avian in shape, with short webbed arms and four long spindly fingers. Perhaps its ancestors had flown at some distant point in their evolution, although it was far too heavy for flight now.

He slipped on the translation headset. "Pirreee," he said into the speaker-mic. "I want to talk to Pirreee." The unit translated his words into a series of trills that no human throat could have imitated. The Sirh studied him with solemn, owlish eyes, then picked its way down the rock-strewn trail. Two more followed, then another four, until their tall, graceful bodies surrounded him like a living wall.

The shortest of them topped him by a foot, the tallest by at least two. Half-smothered by their thick, oily scent, he tried to picture these primitive creatures laying the great stone blocks in the temple — and failed. "Pirreee?" he repeated. "Is Pirreee here?"

Turning its long, slender neck until its elongated head was sideways, one native stepped closer and answered with a shrill cry.

"This one Pirreee," the translator said.

"I want to know about the temple." Tierney watched the beaklike mouth. "What do you see when you go there?"

The Sirh flattened its spiky crest, while the others stiffened and flapped their short arms, their body coverings standing on end.

"Human-things." Pirreee's brown-on-gold eyes gleamed as it picked its clawed feet up and set them back down in a precise little dance.

Despite the early-morning chill, a trickle of sweat ran down Tierney's forehead. "Before the humans, what did you see?"

It threw its head back and answered in a great, earsplitting cry, while its companions wove their long necks from side to side and hissed, their eyes cold and reptilian.

"Unknown term," the translator said into his ear.

"Please!" Tierney sidestepped the restless claws that could have disemboweled him with a single kick. "I want to make the humans leave your temple, so I have to understand. Why do you go there?"

Pirreee shook itself, then sidled closer and chittered at him.

"Wind," the translator said.

"What — else?" Tierney asked.

The Sirh's eyelids fluttered. "Skies . . . land-over-the-sea . . . Leader. . . ."

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Its voice subsided into a tuneless crooning that was taken up by the others.

Tierney gasped as the Sirh's meaningless chorus grew in volume and pitch until he thought his eardrums would burst. Jerking off the headset, he stumbled backward and came up hard against an agitated native.

It shrieked and kicked him head over heels onto the stone-littered ground. The others loomed over him, jumping and squawking, their foot-claws shredding his clothes and missing his body by the merest fractions of an inch.

Facedown in the yellow dirt, he covered his head with his arms. Blood thundered in his ears; after what the humans had done at the temple, they had every right to be angry, every right to stomp his miserable life out right here and now.

The angry Sirh voices subsided and he realized they were leaving. Shaking, he sat up and stared after their tall, stately bodies as they loped back over the rise in leisurely ten-foot strides.

"Idiot!" he told himself. He couldn't have botched this contact worse if he'd been a wet-behind-the-ears student out on his first field run. He fingered a long bloody scratch down the side of his neck.

The back of his mind nagged that he was too old for this. He pushed himself up slowly from the rocky dirt, feeling each and every one of his seventy-two years. He had failed enough for one lifetime; he ought to be safely ensconced in a seminary somewhere where he could tell youngsters how to live their lives and forget about trying to make sense of his own.

Halfway back to the compound, he met Redbird as she strode determinedly toward him, every inch of her compact body squared and tense.

Before he could speak, she waved a fist in negation. "Never mind. I knew it wouldn't work." Her dark-brown eyes gazed mercilessly at him. "It will take years to establish a working communication with the Sirh." She took a deep, quivering breath. Tears glistened in the corners of her dark eyes. "But we don't have years. The status board on the compound's computer just confirmed the supply ship's arrival tomorrow."

He sagged. No doubt, more pilgrims would be on board, more converts for the temple, more killing, unless he could find a way to end this mess today. "I — have to go back to the temple."

"You can't." Her voice was harsh. "One more trip, and you'll be down there for good, just like the rest of them."

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"You resisted it."

"Did I?" Her mouth twisted. "Or have I just postponed it?"

"Of course not." He took her arm and urged her toward the compound. "Whatever's going on down there, it's not real; both you and I understand that, even if no one else does."

HE SPENT the rest of the morning and all of the afternoon recalibrating his instruments and studying the readings he'd taken the day before. He ran a cross-checking program on the expedition computer, but no apparent correlations came up. The land under the temple was just dirt and rock and a few trace minerals, the building materials were just granite, the air was just oxygen and hydrogen with the normal assortment of inert gases thrown in for good measure. Radiation levels of all sorts fell within acceptable parameters. It was an ordinary site in every way — except that God seemed to live there.

Late in the afternoon, Redbird appeared in the computer room doorway, fear written in her jumpy eyes and rigid shoulders.

"What if it is real?" She paced the small room as he studied the screenful of statistics. "What if the devotional energy a species invests in a site builds up over a period of millennia until it becomes some kind of link with the Unknown?"

"Dalthea. . . ." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. A slowly spinning spiral of weariness pulled at him. "There is no Unknown, as you mean it. I wasted almost an entire lifetime in the celebration and pursuit of such nonsense before I finally understood that. There is only the understood and the yet-to-be-understood, nothing else."

She didn't answer him, and when, after a moment, he opened his eyes again, she was gone. Just as well. He rubbed at the knotted muscles in his aching neck. What he had to do would be difficult enough if he only had to worry about himself. She would be safer here at the compound.

He gathered up his equipment and threaded his way back through the halls. Outside, it was nearing dusk, the silver sky gone to pewter overhead, then tarnishing to full darkness in the east. The cooling air wheezed painfully in his chest as he set his feet on the white gravel path to the temple.

Up on the ridge that ran above him, a single Sirh stood tall and silent, its legs impossibly slender, silhouetted black against the fading light. Then

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another long-legged form appeared behind it, and another, and another, strung out like images repeated in a series of mirrors.

As he passed, their heads turned, commenting in a low warble. They trotted after him, one by one, the pungent oiliness of their bodies blown to him on the strengthening breeze.

"No!" He turned around and waved his arms at them. "Go back!"

Hissing and squawking, they stopped and milled just out of reach, their movements quick and precise. He watched their enigmatic faces uneasily and wondered if he should return for the translator. It had been of very little use, though, and he decided against it. Probably they would stop short of entering the temple grounds after what had happened before. He turned his back on them and continued down the path.

After about ten minutes' walk, the white barrier loomed ahead and his heart gave a painful lurch, remembering the man of fire. He stumbled the last few steps to the stone fence before he sank to his knees to observe.

The Sirh crowded in behind him, their breath cool and feathery as they craned their long necks over his head. Worried, he watched the temple square where there seemed to be more people than last time, and as he watched, even more spilled out of the dark doorway, women, men, children, lifting their voices in an eerie song. An icy thrill of fear gripped his heart as Dalthea Redbird emerged, her upturned face radiant.

Her words came back to him . . . that this was "the hoop, the sacred center of the universe." What if she was right, what if ephemeral Man, imprisoned in space and time, and the eternal principal known as "God" could interface with each other here?

"Father Tierney!" Dalthea Redbird's exuberant voice broke into his musings. "Father, this place is proof of the Truth!" Her tone was jubilant. "Once Amerinds have come here and Seen, no one will ever doubt again!"

His hands shook as he tried to stand up. Vatican VII had sent him to investigate the reported miracles, but he realized now that he had come, not only not believing, but unwilling to be convinced. What if he were wrong and God really did speak down there in that heathen temple? Shouldn't this place belong to everyone?

Behind him the Sirh chittered uneasily, their voices growing louder and louder. They pushed against him and knocked him off-balance, their bones unexpectedly sharp under their downy body coverings, then backed off a little, seemingly angry, but unsure.

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He tried to move out of their way but they suddenly burst over him like water overflowing a dam, leaping the white stone barrier and surging down into the human-filled square.

Tierney pulled himself up on the stones and stared in horror as a weapon flashed, bright as sunlight on a new coin. A charging native screamed in a high-pitched burble and fell to the ground amidst the broad paving stones, writhing and smoking. Tierney's stomach turned inside out as the crackling laser traced a red line of death across the breasts of the charging Sirh.

"No!" He flung his arms out as though he could stop them. "No! You can't do this!" But his words were lost in the rising cheer from the humans below. The stink of burned meat filled the air as a young woman fumbled for a fresh energy-pack for her gun.

He couldn't breathe — it was Lyrell all over again, except that the Sirh didn't have a spade or a hoe, not so much as even a rock in their four-fingered hands.

Not this time! He struggled to his feet and lurched down the slope, fighting to keep his balance. If indeed God were here, He would never sanction this! The sacred could not be bought with the blood of innocents!

The remaining Sirh circled nervously just beyond the broad paving stones, not charging, but not retreating either. At the edge of the plaza, one badly burned native beat its skin-webbed arms against the stone, unable to flee. A few feet away, the woman snapped a new energy-pack into her gun.

"In the name of God!" Tierney yelled at her as he ran. "It's their temple!"

She leveled the barrel at the Sirh. "Not anymore, padre."

As Tierney threw his body across the wounded creature, the air above the plaza shimmered, then solidified into a barrel-chested man with glaring brown eyes and a flowing white beard. "And they said self-sacrifice was dead — how quaint."

The Sirh's body trembled beneath Tierney, and he felt the blood pounding in his ears. "Stop this!"

"Just when things are getting off to such a good start?" The bearded man bared his big white teeth in a fierce smile. "How very New Testament of you." His eyes sparkled like cut glass in the fading light. "Besides, they're only half-sentient pagans, not worth the effort."

It's not real, Tierney told himself. *It's just a construction of my own mind, my idea of what God would be.*

"That's an interesting theory." The bearded man folded his arms. "Too

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bad you can't be sure."

The Sirh raised its head and stared at the apparition with pain-glazed eyes. It shook itself and struggled to rise, chittering in weak spurts. He supported its weight as it tottered up onto its feet.

Did it see the bearded man, Tierney wondered, or something else, something entirely Sirhinese? He thought back to what the Sirh had tried to tell him — *wind . . . skies . . . land-over-the-sea.* If only he could understand what this place meant to the Sirh, then perhaps he could make the humans listen!

Far away and faint, he heard the thrum of wings like a measured drumbeat. The cold air sang like a teakettle against his face . . . the ground fell away from under his feet and the universe suddenly stretched out in every direction.

Terrified, he found himself surrounded by pale-silver sky with only a few white wisps of clouds for company. Below, the ocher-and-brown land raced by, rivers and mountains, plains and a vast forest of yellow forms that might have been some sort of trees.

"That's birds for you. Gave up the sky so they could evolve brains and now that they have them, all they think about is getting back into the air."

His arms flailing for support that wasn't there, Tierney managed a glance over his shoulder.

The bearded man winked. "Silly, isn't it? But humans are like that too, always wanting what they don't have, never noticing what's right under their noses. No wonder you need me."

"I — don't need you!" Tierney forced out.

"Don't be ridiculous. It doesn't make any difference how far you travel or how much you have, you're always looking for me."

"Not anymore!" Something flashed in the distance, a broad expanse of iridescent white crawling with rainbow colors. He squinted, trying to make it out. The sound of wings deepened.

"I suppose that some people have to play the fool." The bearded man sighed. "You disappoint me."

Not as much as I've disappointed myself, Tierney thought. The thing banked and turned back toward him, a great white flyer with a long, sinuous neck and unblinking eyes of burning silver. Setting its wings, it glided closer and closer until its immense body blotted out the sky and its

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cool, sulfuric-scented breath filled his lungs.

"Seen enough?" The bearded man asked.

He felt his flesh dissolving under the creature's fierce gaze until there was nothing left but the aching knot of loneliness that had been at his core ever since Lyrell. It continued to approach, its eyes blazing silver suns, its body the entire world. It pulled at him, wanted him; he felt it all the way into his marrow. The silver eyes were beacons; it knew the way . . . *home.*

With a rush of joy and gratitude, he turned to follow it.

When he felt the broad, flat stones of the temple plaza beneath his feet again, he opened his eyes. The ever-present humans wandered around him like lost children, absorbed in their own private visions. The female soldier stared at him with eyes of blue ice, her pistol still leveled at the burned Sirh in his arms. He clutched its trembling body closer, an unaccustomed white-hot fury bubbling up through him. The temple belonged to the Sirh! If these people felt compelled to come here for enlightenment, why didn't they seek the purity of the Sirh's vision instead of polluting it with their own longings?

The feel of the skies came back to him, the freedom, the sense of home-going that had been his a moment ago. All of that would be lost if his fellow humans had their way. "Stop it!" he shouted. The clouded sea of eyes turned toward him.

"They won't listen," the bearded man said. "Don't you know by now that your kind never has enough?" He bared his large white teeth in a fierce smile. "They take and take — and they'll go on taking until the end of time."

"No!" The breath caught in Tierney's chest. "I won't let them! I'll make them See!" With all his might, he threw back his head and summoned the Great Wind with its promise of home-going, the Leader and its healing sense of purpose. He braced his shoulders back, calling . . . seeking. . . .

A breath of cool air stirred through his sparse hair; he heard the distant beat of wings. A few feet away, a woman with lank blonde hair murmured in surprise and looked up into the fading light.

Tierney winced as his vision hazed and his heart began to beat erratically.

"You're nothing more than a dried-up old fossil," the bearded man hisssed in his ear. "Keep that up and you'll burst a blood vessel."

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He *was* unworthy—gritting his teeth, Tierney acknowledged that as he fought the awakening hot knot of pain in his chest.

Several grimy, unshaven men darted out of the temple entrance, exclaiming and pointing upward. A ripple of amazement ran through the ragged, dirty crowd. Tierney heard the powerful wings draw closer and closer until each stroke split the air like thunder and the ground rumbled in answer beneath his feet.

Wind whipped through the plaza, whining around the temple stones. Broken twigs and faded yellow leaves danced aloft and disappeared into the sky. The humans backed away, their eyes wide, staring up in amazement and fear.

"Can't you See?" Tierney murmured to them. "It's so beautiful . . . so . . . right. . . ."

The Leader's huge shadow glided over the plaza and blotted out the setting red sun. A black-haired girl screamed and ran for the white-stone barrier, fighting the wind as she struggled up the hill. Several more bolted after her, stumbling and falling, followed by a woman dragging her child, then the whole crowd, running in terror as though they had only one mind between them.

Sweat-drenched, Tierney sank back down on the stones and clasped his aching left arm to his side.

The Leader banked its majestic wings for another pass.

"Father, you have to leave that contaminated ground." Flanked by several men in blue-and-gold Patrol uniforms, Dalthea Redbird stood just on the other side of the white-stone barrier encircling the temple. "The Sirh have withdrawn their Contact agreement. They want the rest of us to go. The ship is ready and we can't wait any longer."

Surrounded by his Sirhinese attendants in the center of the temple plaza, Tierney watched her honest, broad cheekboned face. The distant thrum of wings hovered at the edge of his awareness.

"Father, think!" Tears rasped in her voice. "This isn't real. There are no miracles here, no true visions. After the Patrol arrived, we used their equipment and discovered a vein of psi-active mineral under the temple that amplifies thoughts; you're just picking up a migration fantasy from the minds of the Sirh." She clenched her fists and strained toward him. "The Expedition has been canceled. Everyone is grateful for what you did,

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but it's over now. This world has been officially Prohibited."

One of his Sirh companions angled its head and chittered harshly at her. Tierney laid a calming hand on its neck. "I have to stay," he said. "I have to be here to make them See."

"There's no one left to See, Father. They're all gone now. It's time for you to go home too."

"But I am home," Tierney whispered. He closed his eyes and felt the sweet firmness of the air as it caught under his outstretched arms and swept him back into the sky. The cool wind sang against his face as he turned into it. He heard the Leader's immense cry of welcome.

No, he had left his life of ashes behind forever; he would never go back.

Not when he knew the way to the Land-over-the-sea.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE FUTURE IS TELEVISION

THIS ISN'T exactly the second coming of the Golden Age of Television we're living in. Not when the slackwitted sitcom continues to extend its domination of network programming, pushing drama and variety programs to near extinction. With cable or a satellite dish your options expand, but not necessarily your choices. At times, it indeed seems as though there are "Fifty-seven Channels and Nothing On."

Still, I'm beginning to believe that television is making better *movies* these days than the Hollywood studio machine. It's a sad, scary thought. And I'm not sure whether it means that television is doing something well for a change. More likely, it is simply another indicator of how low the American film industry has sunk.

It's practically impossible for me to find a feature film to review for this column some months. (This is one of those months.) Science fiction film is in a real doldrums at the cineplex. The ultra-violent action film seems to have a corner on the market, such as it is. Those of us who like a storyline and a little character development to go with our high body count are usually at a dead loss.

When we're lucky — which isn't often — there's an enjoyable comedy with fantasy elements to watch. *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray was just such a film. Murray's comic brilliance made the story of a man stuck in the same rotten day (until he gets it right) genuinely funny. But the film was also romantic in a day when most films settle for an approximation of sexy. And, gosh by golly, it had a totally corny yet practically revolutionary message: that caring about the people around you brings real joy and meaning to your life.

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It was a movie that didn't trigger bloodlust or a tension migraine. It was *enjoyable.* (What a concept!) If you didn't see it at the theaters, be sure to catch it on tape. Which brings us back to your television.

Made-for-television films are seldom as good as *Groundhog Day* was. And they are hardly ever as funny. (Even though the sitcom rules the TV airwaves, the television *movie* is rarely a comedy.) Network movies tend toward melodrama, with some sort of social problem providing the theme. Issues that feature films shy away from — AIDS, abortion, family violence, substance abuse — have all been the focus of television films. That's why terms like "disease-of-the-week" and "women in jeopardy" are frequently used to describe the telefilm.

At this point, it feels like every issue has been done to death. This is a problem TV movies share with talk shows, of course. Poor Phil Donahue is scraping the bottom of the barrel these days to find a "new" show. Look for one on transvestite killers and the frigid, compulsive-shopping neo-nazis who love them to come on the old tube real soon. And don't laugh. Producers have probably already signed those guests to a TV movie deal.

Victim-issue movies and tabloid films that exploit the latest headlines (like the *three* done on Amy Fisher's pathetic story) will probably continue to be stock and trade for the television features. Yet there is more of a mix to tube flicks lately. And there are two related reasons for this. Television's expansion, with cable networks starting to produce original pictures, is one contributing factor. Another is the involvement of more high profile talents in the making of telefeatures.

There are more opportunities to do different kinds of television films these days. And those opportunities are drawing big-name talents who have grown sick of the "development hell" gridlock of the major studios and the marketing executive's stranglehold on the creative product.

Film noir has made a comeback in recent features like Tamra Davis's *Guncrazy* — which was so good it went from Showtime to theatrical release, and then to tape. And farce with a social bite has also made a reappearance. Two HBO features, *Barbarians at the Gate* and *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom* showed us the pitfalls of power-grubbing on both the corporate and domestic level.

And even science fiction is getting better film treatment from tele-

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vision than it is from big studios. During one week and a half period in May — yes, we're talking "sweeps" time — three significant science fiction films were broadcast to America's living rooms. The formats and quality varied, but taken together, they say to me that the future of science fiction film may lie, in large part, on the smaller screen.

The first to be shown, and the only one to fit within the feature length format, was *Daybreak*, which premiered on HBO on May 8th. Based on Alan Bowne's play entitled *Beirut*, writer-director Stephen Tolkin's movie is, in the great tradition of disease-of-the-week films, a social issue melodrama. Only the time has been moved forward, and the disease is never given a name.

You'll have no trouble guessing which malady the filmmakers had in mind, however. In the near future, life is bleak and economic times are hard. (You can tell this is a dystopia because everyone wears dingy, drab-hued, loose-fitting, cropped outfits — kind of like professional dancers who washed all their rehearsal clothes, light and dark, together in hot water.) Jobs are scarce. Young women like Blue (Moira Kelly) and her best friend, Laurie (Martha Plimpton), are learning a trade in a government "WorkFare" program, picking Pepsi cans out of the trash. Young men with their eye toward the future all join the Home Guard, a paramilitary group of brown-shirts (except they do their laundry funny, too, and their shirts came out a dull green) organized to keep the undesirables under control.

At the top of the list of undesirables are those who have tested positive for an unnamed transmittable plague. And the way the government and its assorted goons control the infected population is to first identify them through free clinic testing, and then spirit them off to filthy "quarantine" gulags. A letter "P" tattoo, with tracking device, marks positives for what little time is left to them.

A small underground exists. Its members are mostly people of color, gays, and women. One of its leaders is a man called Torch (Cuba Gooding, Jr.). When Blue meets this man, and learns the truth about quarantine, she joins the struggle, even though her brother is a member of the Guard.

Daybreak could easily have been one of those movies all about resisting Big Brother, in which cold-eyed slugs in nice uniforms, carrying spiffy high-tech weapons, are repeatedly out-gunned by a rag-tag group of people with antique muskets (and pure hearts). But Tolkin kept his

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material from wandering too far afield into the action formula.

This is a much more intimate movie, as befits a story about a disease spread through body fluids. There are several action sequences, and a nice dose of social commentary. But more than anything else, *Daybreak* is a Romeo and Juliet tragic romance with a surprisingly affirmative ending. The phrase "forbidden love" takes on a whole new meaning when society's disapproval is compounded with the threat of acquiring a deadly disease.

Moira Kelly and Cuba Gooding, Jr. really heat up the screen as the star-crossed lovers. And their story brings an essential warmth and humanity to this science fiction fable.

The following night, May 9th, ABC began a two-night "World Premiere Event." Networks are starting to resist the diminution of their product with the description "Mini-series." But some movies deserve belittling. And *The Tommyknockers* is a good example of a small movie in a big package.

It is, of course, based on the novel by Stephen King. And I can't tell you how faithful the adaptation is. (I'm sorry, but life is too short to read Stephen King novels. Especially recent ones.) I can tell you that I thought it was about the slowest, silliest four hours I ever spent.

It seems that the good folks of Haven, Maine, are starting to act peculiar. It's somehow related to a strange, stone monument a writer named Bobbi (Marg Helgenberger) has discovered in the woods. She can't stop digging at it, and the more it's uncovered the more it seems to exert a strange force upon the local townspeople. Those weaklings, the women and children, are the first to fall under the spell. But by hour three, all surviving citizens are enthralled by a lime-colored light.

Everyone except Bobbi's significant other, a has-been poet named Gard (Jimmy Smits), who slides back into the bottle from time to time. His alcoholism provides no protection, but the plate in his head from an old ski injury evidently does. Gard is alarmed to see his woman become a Stepford zombie. But he can't break the spell.

If you can't lick 'em, pretend to join 'em. That's how Gard discovers that the Tommyknockers are actually aliens buried under the earth. These creatures from another world have the power to drain all human energy, but for some reason their weapons look like something out of Robin Hood. Battle axes? Couldn't they put some of that green stuff into a ray gun?

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That was my biggest problem with *The Tommyknockers.* Nothing made a heck of a lot of sense to me. And the film, which seemed to go on and on, still couldn't be bothered to explain a thing. I understand that familiar King theme of horror springing from the unleashed id of ordinary people. But how does any of that relate to some shriveled-up aliens who are trying to harness people-power?

The Tommyknockers seem to expend all kinds of energy making mischief, when they need it badly — it would appear — to animate their evil e.t. bodies and to launch their buried ship. For example, one woman is brainwashed by a Tommyknocker-altered TV game show into killing her philandering husband. She is then locked up in a loony-bin in some other town. Thus, those idiots from outer space lose two perfectly good adult power sources.

Perhaps the plot and characters hang together in that massive novel of King's. But a screen adaptation has to be able to stand alone. ABC's story, directed by John Power and written by Lawrence D. Cohen, doesn't. It is fall-down dumb. *And* boring.

Seldom, in fact, have I seen a film so teeth-shatteringly stupid. Hey, that's it. That's why the characters in *The Tommyknockers* all started losing their teeth! At least I made some sense of one aspect of the story.

I sometimes think that filmmakers believe that clarity is unimportant in science fiction. (If they think that, they're dead wrong.) Even a "fantasy" demands its own logic, if an audience is going to be willing to suspend disbelief in its honor. *The Tommyknockers* defied all reason. And it was bad to boot.

Another ABC television event that premiered a week later, *Wild Palms,* is a much different story. I'd like to say that it proved that you can be strange and still make sense. But what *Wild Palms* really illustrates is that if you are stylish and original enough, some viewers will forgive you almost anything. Although not enough of them, as the ratings of this "Event" series prove.

It's not that *Wild Palms* is illogical. In its own Elizabethan-Kabuki-Sophoclean-Russian novel way, it makes perfect sense. Only thing is, you need a family tree, a glossary, and a historical primer to get it all on the first go round. And I am obviously not the only person who screened the advance tapes and realized this fact.

The press-kit included *A "Wild Palms" Glossary. TV Guide* published a little two-page "manual" to

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prepare viewers. And St. Martin's press really did it up right. Roger Trilling, the West Coast editor of the magazine, *Details*, which first published the "Wild Palms" comic strip (written by Bruce Wagner and drawn by Julian Allen), edited a 128 page book full of background and supplementary documents.

Perusing *The Wild Palms Reader* before viewing would certainly cut down on the confusion. But, luckily, this is the kind of six-hour futuristic epic, directed by talented folk like Kathryn Bigelow and Phil Joanou, that fans will enjoy seeing several times to pick up the finer points. Once you know who's related to whom — basically, everyone is related to everyone else, at least by marriage or adoption — and once you've established who the double- and triple-agents are — basically, everyone has divided loyalties, whether they mean to or not — then you can start to *understand* this tale of virtual reality and political control.

But, look at it this way, any viewers who are a little dazzled and confused by *Wild Palms* can comfort themselves with the fact that the film's hero, patent attorney Harry Wyckoff (James Belushi), is even more confused. When he takes a new job working for a television network owned by a cracked, charismatic billionaire named Anton Kreutzer (Robert Loggia, in a marvelous performance), his world starts to spin violently out of control.

Kreutzer isn't just a captain of industry. He wants to be the chief of state — and emperor of the universe, if he can manage it. To this end he runs high-tech firms developing powerful new virtual reality technology, and uses the new technologies to control the media. He even has his own religion, Synthiotics, and powerful political friends and paramilitary enforcers called The Fathers. And then there's his staunchest ally, his baby sister, Josie (Angie Dickenson). She'll do anything to aid her brother's rise to absolute power.

All Harry wants — or thinks he wants — is a house at the beach. What he gets is a trip to Hell and part of the way back. Back to a day at the beach.

Don't bother asking yourself why there's a rhino in the pool or why, in the year 2007, women's dress looks exactly as it does today, while men's business suits make them look like escapees from a Dickens novel. And what is William Gibson doing at a Kreutzer news conference? And what's with all that music from the 1960s?

As I say, don't ask. The strains of "Gimme Shelter" seem oddly fit-

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ting. As do all the strange, absurd elements to this extremely complicated tale.

Kreutzer's Channel 3 has a new slogan: "They Said the Revolution Wouldn't Be Televised: They Were Wrong." I don't know about the revolution. But if the sweeps week of May 1993 is any indication, some decent science fiction will be televised. And that makes the time pass, till the revolution, a little more pleasantly.

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Dale Bailey's first published short story, "Eidelman's Machine," appeared in our July issue. He writes that his second, "Touched," has its foundations in his own childhood.

"I was born in southern West Virginia," he writes, "and spent most of my life there. Since I was a teenager, I've been fascinated by the coal-field wars that consumed the state in the 1920s, when it was organized by the United Mine Workers of America....I'd long wished to set a story in this milieu, but I didn't figure out how to do it until I one day happened to recall an old Appalachian superstition — the idea that the mentally handicapped child is in some way compensated for his disability. This single notion opened up the whole story for me."

Touched

By Dale Bailey

H, MAMA, YOU SAY. AND again: Oh, Mama.

Your chest hurts with a dull unceasing ache, but you say it quiet-like, half afraid she'll hear you.

Mama wishes you would die.

And anyway, she mostly listens to Cade, when Cade is here. Papa, too, and Gramma sometimes.

Gramma now, rocking here in her place by the stove, saying: That one's a half-wit. That one's touched. The old woman lowers a trembling finger at you, huddled beside her, here by the stove.

Coughing the steady, hacking cough that has been with you for days, you move closer to the firebox, but even here you feel the draft from the broken window pane, like icy fingers beneath your clothes. Mama's asked the company to patch up that hole, maybe a thousand times, but the company takes its time about things. And the cardboard — well, it doesn't do much good. So you huddle closer to the firebox and watch Mama like you do

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sometimes when she doesn't think you're looking. Mama is churning butter. And every once in a while, if she thinks you're not watching, she steals a glance at you.

The coughing's got her hopeful.

Touched, Gramma says again, and Mama's pretty face twists up like she just bit into a green apple. She stops churning and wipes at her forehead with her hand. What do you mean, old woman? she says. Touched?

But Gramma just rocks, back and forth, back and forth. Her rocker squeaks against the floor, squeak, squeak, a noise like a mouse might make. This sound, the cold draft, the heavy scent of beans simmering atop the stove, and Gramma looming over you. Her mouth caves in, wrinkled as a prune. White hairs poke out of her chin.

Mama starts to churn again. The dasher thumps against the wooden crock.

Out the window, pallid winter light climbs the high ridges. Evening coming on. Cade will be home from school soon. And in a little while Pap will be back too, carrying his tool poke across his shoulder, his face black with coal dust.

Gramma says, Touched. Touched by the hand of God. Idiot child'll have a talent.

Mama snorts, and crosses the room to stir the beans. Then she hunkers down beside you and her rough fingers touch your face. Jorey, Mama says. Her voice is cold and hollow-sounding. Jorey doesn't have a talent, old woman. Jorey doesn't have anything at all.

Your coughing starts again, but just then the plank door swings open. Cade sweeps into the room, sweeping in the cold.

Cade, Mama says, her voice filling up. You're home.

Mama stands and you cough hard, jarring congestion loose in your chest. You inch closer to the firebox, almost against the cast iron stove.

Oh, Mama, you say.

But Mama, she doesn't even look around.

High above the number five hole, the chill silence folds around you like a blanket. No shrill voices jeer you; no fingers point. Up here, no one sneaks along behind you to throw you to the frozen ground.

Just the cold, your breath smoky in the still air, and the gaunt trees, dark

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against the ridges as far as you can see. In the stillness, electric cars clank out of the shaft beneath you, bearing load after rattling load of coal. Far below, railroad tracks veer away from the coal tipple into the steep-walled valley. And if you squint your eyes you can just see the tar-paper roofs of the Copperhead coal camp, black squares against the barren earth.

Home. Mama's waiting.

You jingle the scrip in your pocket, rocking a little in your flannel coat to keep warm. Somehow you can't quite bring yourself to go. It's not the other kids so much as it is your pap, down there somewhere, deep under the mountain. That and the sun, falling against your face as it sets toward the rim of the valley, and a squirrel, perched at the edge of the precipice, gnawing at a frozen nut. You used to bring chunks of bread to feed that squirrel, but you haven't done that since Mama whipped you for stealing bread.

With a rustle of dry leaves, Cade appears at the edge of the woods. He hunkers down beside you, resting his elbows on his thighs. The squirrel hurries into the safety of a looming hickory to scold him, but you just laugh.

Pretty funny, huh, Jorey, Cade says.

But the laughter turns to coughing, the coughing into the hot shameful sting of tears.

Them kids been giving you a hard time again? Cade asks.

You nod, ashamed for Cade to see you cry. Boys aren't supposed to cry.

But Cade just squats there, peers out into the sky, and lets you have your cry. After a while you stop crying and look up at his slim brown face, his blue eyes narrowed against the sun. Nobody's got blue eyes like my Cade, Mama says. And it's true. Cade's face is so handsome and regular that you almost want to reach out and touch it. Perhaps that is what you are extending your short fingers to do when he turns abruptly to look at you.

Feel better? Cade asks. He breaks into a wide smile and reaches out to ruffle your hair.

Okay, you say. What Mama says don't work.

What's Mama say? Cade asks.

Tell them to go jump in a lake.

Cade laughs and sits down. His breath hangs in the cold air.

You laugh, too. Everybody laughs when Cade laughs, except Pap. Maybe because Mama specially likes Cade, but you're not sure. You wish Mama talked to you the way she talked to Cade, her voice all full up instead of thin

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and sorry-sounding.

Nah, Cade says, pulling his legs up against his chest and resting his chin on his knees. I reckon telling them to go jump in a lake wouldn't do much good.

You say nothing, like you always do, mostly because you don't know what to say. It's okay to be quiet though, especially with Cade. He showed you this place, Cade did. Said it was his special place for thinking, and now it's your special place, too, though you don't think much.

Cade is humming a snatch of something under his breath when you speak again. Mama send you to find me? you ask.

Mama said you done run off with the lamp oil money, that's all, Cade says. I reckoned you were up here.

Mama's going to be mad, you say. You jingle the scrip in your pocket.

Mama ain't going to be mad, Cade says. I'll take care of Mama. She don't understand you, that's all.

Understand me how, you ask.

Cade turns to study you with his clear blue eyes. Mama's funny that way, Jorey. Sometimes, she forgets how special you are.

I ain't special, you say. Stupid, maybe.

Cade chuckles. Well, you ain't no professor, Jorey, that's for sure. But you're special all right.

Cade tousles your hair and laughs again and stands. But you don't move, not for a long moment. Cade's words jolt some memory: Gramma saying, That one's touched. Those words rattling around in your head.

C'mon, lazy, Cade says, prodding at you with his boot. C'mon, we gotta get back.

You stand and the scrip jingles in your pocket again. You think of the lamp oil, and the commissary, closed till morning, and you say, Mama's going to be mad.

But Cade says, Don't you worry. Company's sending in some Baldwin-Felts men on the afternoon train. Mama's got plenty to worry her tonight without bothering about you.

He laughs again, but this time there's something underneath the laugh, something shrill and excited and maybe a little scared—something you can't quite put a name to. An uneasy feeling swirls through your belly.

Then Cade says, shivering, Let's go. It's cold out here.

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He throws his arm around your shoulders and together you strike off into the woods, angling away from the mine, down toward the tracks and home. Looking back, you see the squirrel come down out of the hickory to sniff around on the rock. Something warm and pleasant opens up inside you, and that uneasy feeling is gone, for a little while anyway.

IT'S WORSE AT night, the coughing is, and with it a kind of tightness that closes in around your lungs. But no one really notices, not tonight.

Pap, Mama, and Cade are deep in talk, hunched around the table, the kerosene lamp between them. Their long twisting shadows skulk away behind them. The shack is a fitful menagerie of shadows. Gramma's snakes along the floor here by the stove, and yours rocks close beside it: a small boy's shadow, just like any other.

Mama's face is pale in the red gleam, saying, with a tremble in her voice you've never heard there, The boy's too young, Jack.

Pap, his gray hair thin, dark lines of coal dust beneath his eyes, Pap says, We ain't got any choice. Copperhead won't stop at nothing to keep the union out of West Virginia. We got to make a show of force.

Cade leans forward and places his big hands, knotting and unknotting, against the table. His shadow seems to follow him, up along the rough wall and ceiling, looming over him. Cade says, He's right, Mama.

What do you mean, he's right? What about school?

It's only one day, Pap says.

Cade isn't a miner, says Mama.

Ain't nothing else you can be in these parts, Gramma says from her rocker. You ought to know that, Lilla.

Them Baldwin-Felts men coming up from Bluefield tomorrow, Pap says. They're bringing scabs with them.

Let them come, Mama says, but my boy is going to school.

Goddammit, Pap says, he ain't no boy anymore. He's near sixteen years old.

He's fifteen, Mama says. Just a boy. I won't let you use him. People might die there tomorrow. Cade might die.

Pap curses and stands, his chair clattering to the floor behind him. He strides to the window with long angry steps. In the silence, Cade looks into

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Mama's eyes with that way he has. Cade could charm a snake, Mama says sometimes, and she looks back at him now with shiny, fearful eyes.

Mama, you want to live in them tents again? Cade asks with a voice smooth like syrup.

Mama sniffles and shakes her head. Pap turns from the window to watch, and in the flickering light you can see his eyes are wet, too. Suddenly, without knowing why, you want to go to him, to press your face against his rough shirt, but you hold your peace here by the stove, watching.

Cade says, The strike's going to happen, Mama. There ain't nothing we can do about it. Tomorrow them Baldwin-Felts men are going to throw us out of here and we'll be in those tents again.

You want to live in them goddamned tents all winter? Pap says from across the room. Half-starved and freezing, with Jorey coughing like he is?

Mama doesn't even look at you.

What about Ma, Pap says, jabbing his finger at the old woman.

Cade silences him with a look. For a moment, the only sounds are Gramma's rocker, squeaking, and the lamp, sputtering, nearly dry. Cade says, They'll throw us out, Mama. Put niggers to work in the mines, let niggers live in our houses.

Pap says, Anybody going to take that coal out of the mountain, it's going to be us. It's only right.

But why Cade? Take Jorey if you have to, but not Cade, Mama says. She starts to cry.

Pap laughs. Jorey, he says. You know better, Lilla.

And Cade says, Mama, we got to stand up to them tomorrow. And every man as can help ought to help.

Just then, the kerosene is gone. The lamp flickers and dies. In the half-darkness, the room red with the gleam of the stove, Mama says, Stupid child. That's all the lamp oil.

Pap curses and moves to the door. You follow, the room suddenly too close with the smell of kerosene and burning coal, with Mama crying in the gloom. You slip out behind Pap, out into a cutting wind, somehow pure in its iciness. The door slams behind you.

Dark mountains loom against the sky. It has begun to snow, tiny wind-driven flakes, like grains of sand flung against your face. You shiver.

Pap, standing out on the other side of the road, at the edge of an icy creek,

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turns to face you. Jorey, he says.

Yes sir, Pap, you say.

What are you doing out here, boy? Too cold for you, with that cough.

You cross the road, scuffing your feet against the dirt. Too hot inside, you say. I want to be with you.

Pap shrugs out of his flannel coat and drapes it around your shoulders. He stands there for a minute, then says, Let's walk.

Together, Pap's arm heavy across your shoulders, you head down into the coal camp. Beyond the stream, dark woods press close. The other side of the road is lined with shacks, shuttered against the cold, trailing wind-blown streams of smoke. The stench of burning coal hangs like a pall over the valley.

Wish I could help tomorrow, you say.

I know, Pap says.

You walk in silence for a while. The stream chatters along beside you. In daylight, it runs black with coal dust, that stream, but now it shines silvery in the falling snow, clean-looking. The blackness is still there. You just can't see it.

Mama wants me to help, you say.

Pap sighs, his breath gray and cloudy in the darkness. Your mama don't know what she wants, most of the time, he says. You ain't to judge her, Jorey.

At last, the stream turns away into the woods. You emerge into a rutted street, bordered on this side by a network of railroad tracks that runs the length of the camp. Beyond them, a weather-beaten line of buildings, black behind the shifting curtain of snow, straggles along the dirt lane.

Together, you and Pap cross the tracks and mount the steps to the commissary porch. A single electric lamp glows within the store, casting a narrow rectangle of light across the porch and the wooden walkway that fronts the street. Pap lowers himself to the oaken bench in one shadowy corner, and cradles his face in cupped palms. You move close against him, against his heat.

Shouts and piano music drift up the street from Janey's Saloon, two blocks away. After a while, Pap raises his head and says, You hear me, Jorey? You ain't to judge your Mama.

Okay, you say.

She ain't from these parts, Pap says. She's from down Bluefield, and that ain't mining country. You remember Bluefield.

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And you do. A long time ago, three, four years maybe, that was. Pap said you needed a real doctor, not a coal field quack, so he and Mama saved up for a while, and then one spring morning you and Mama took the morning train to Bluefield, nearly an hour away. But the doctor, he just shook his head. Nothing I can do, the doctor said. Boy's a mongoloid. Nothing anybody can do.

Afterwards, Mama showed you the house where your grandpa lived. It was a big house with columns, all shining white, and you wanted to go in and see Grandpa. You hadn't ever seen him. But Mama tightened her lips till they turned white and led you away. On the train back to Copperhead, Mama wept. You just sat there, watching the mountains roll by.

No one has ever said a word about that trip, not ever. But Mama hasn't been the same.

Ahh, Jorey, Pap says now. These mountains call you back. You can't never get away.

You don't know what Pap means by this, so you don't say a word. Just shiver, listen to the music from Janey's, and watch the snow spit heavier out of the night sky. It's beginning to stick, the snow is, a gray shroud across all of Copperhead. After a while, you hear the muffled beat of footsteps against the wooden sidewalk. A long figure ambles in front of the commissary, but you and Pap, submerged in shadow, don't say a word until the cough betrays you.

Then Pap stands, pulling you up with him, pulling you into the light. Evening, Granville, Pap says.

Granville Snidow tips a finger to his black hat and crosses his arms against the porch railing. He wears pearl-handled revolvers strapped low to either hip. At home, Pap calls Snidow a Baldwin-Felts s.o.b., but up here on the porch of the commissary, he just smiles in a private kind of way.

Snidow laughs, a harsh sound. The star pinned to his overcoat glints in the light from the electric lamp. His lips widen beneath his mustache — a handsome affair, your mama calls it — thick and bristling, with ends coiled into tight circles. Well, Jack, Snidow says, how come you ain't down at Janey's drinking up some courage?

I don't need to drink my courage, Granville, Pap says. I ain't a drinking man.

Kind of cold for you all to be out tonight, ain't it?

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We was just leaving, Pap says. He grips your shoulder tightly and steers you down to the sidewalk. Together, you cross the tracks and start up the dirt road toward home.

Hey, Jack! Snidow shouts a minute later.

You feel Pap tense as he turns. Granville Snidow is almost lost in the snow that pelts down now out of the sky.

Hey, Jack! Snidow calls. It's a good thing you're heading in! I wouldn't want your half-wit to catch cold!

But Pap doesn't say a word. He just turns away and leads you home. Inside, the tiny shack seems warm after the cold night. In the red glow of the firebox, it is a relief to climb into the warm bed with Cade, stealing his heat. Gramma snores in the dark and you hear Pap shuck his clothes before he crawls in bed with Mama. Then the room falls quiet and you sleep.

Sometime in the night, the coughing wakes you. The whole room is bright with moonlight. Outside, the snow has stopped, but you don't pay it much mind. You just lie there, watching Pap. He sits by the window in a cane-backed chair and his long-johns seem to shine in the moonlight. He's humming quietly to himself, Pap is, humming as he cleans his rifle.

You wake again to the chill glow that precedes dawn, your nerves tingling with the awareness of someone watching you: Gramma, awake, though the others still sleep. The old woman eyes you wordlessly from her place by the stove as you clamber away from Cade's heat, out into the cold air. She doesn't speak as you dress. And when you offer her a hunk of bread to breakfast on, she merely shakes her head and sucks at her toothless gums.

She just watches you with her pale eyes, and never says a word. Perhaps it's because you're touched.

Touched.

That word, and all its vast mystery, rattles around in your head like a seed in a dry gourd. And together with Gramma's unflinching gaze, somehow awful in the sleeping cabin, it is at last enough to chase you out into the frigid dawn, still holding a half-eaten chunk of bread.

Silent as a wraith, you flee through row after row of squalid shacks. With every step your feet punch through frozen drifts and gray snow clutches at your ankles. Gramma's stare seems to follow you, that word —

— *touched* —

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— to linger in your mind.

Only when you reach the edge of the coal camp and turn up the tracks toward the mines, does Gramma's persistent stare seem to fall away behind you, your hunger to return. You start to gnaw at the bread, but the memory of the squirrel probing hungrily about the edge of the precipice returns. A kind of warm feeling opens up in your belly, and you tuck the dry crust into a pocket.

But when at last you reach the special place, up above the number five shaft, the squirrel is dead, curled into a frozen knot at the edge of the cliff.

For a moment, standing there, a terrible sense of vertigo sweeps through you — as if you are falling, falling back into a well of memory. Last winter. An explosion in the number three shaft. Fifteen miners dead.

You won't ever forget those bodies, stiff and bloody, beginning to stink when they were finally dragged from the rubble. You won't ever forget the funeral: the sound of shovels scraping at mounds of frozen earth; the voices of the miners and their families rising in song together, dry and lonely sounding as night wind in the hollers. Death is real to you, palpable, though you can never understand it.

Now, remembering, Mama's words return to you: *People might die there. Cade might die.*

Today.

And then that endless moment snaps; the world settles into place around you. A sob escapes you, and you step forward, falling to your knees, the crust of bread dropped on the ground behind you, forgotten.

The squirrel is rigid and cold to the touch. Frost rimes its whiskers. Its small skull is cracked as neatly as you have seen Pap crack an acorn beneath his heel, and a single dark streak of blood mats the stiff fur above one eye. Perhaps it has fallen from the icy branches of the overhanging hickory. You don't know.

Somehow, though, in the midst of large griefs which surpass your understanding, this small grief touches you. Loss suffuses you, and for a time you clasp the tiny corpse to your chest, unawares.

When you finally look up again, the pale glow of dawn has given way to the broad luster of mid-morning. The chill has crept beneath your flannel coat. It clings close about your feet, wet from the long hike up the mountain. You feel as stiff and cold as the corpse you cradle in your hands.

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As the squirrel. Dead.

You cannot help but recall how the squirrel would nuzzle your empty fingers when the bread was gone, and with that memory a dry emptiness yawns within you. Almost without realizing it, you speak, a single word, whispered in the stillness of morning: No. Something surges within you, a power almost electric. That one word seems to blow away the fog of confusion that clouds your mind. That one word seems to fill you up.

Your fingers, numb with cold mere moments before, grow suddenly warm and flex of their own accord. Your hands flare with sharp sudden pain. The squirrel twists in your grasp, twists again, and tiny jaws clamp around your finger. Sharp teeth grind your flesh, drawing a sudden welter of blood, dark against your pale flesh.

With a cry of fear and astonishment, you release the squirrel's writhing body. It springs away, turns to scold you briefly, and then escapes into the overhanging hickory. You do not move, not even to lift the bleeding finger to your lips.

A sense of mystery and awe you can never articulate rushes through you. That power, that moment of stunning clarity is again eclipsed by fog and confusion. For long hours you turn all your will to dispel that fog, to try to understand. But it is no use. You can never understand anything.

Through all the fog that fills your mind, there is only this mystery: Gramma's voice, saying, *Touched. Touched by the hand of God. Idiot child'll have a talent.*

Though you cannot understand those words, you think of them over and over through the morning. And despite the cold, you do not move again, not till the long rising whine of the afternoon train calls you out of your torpor.

Cade, you think.

And then you are running down the mountain toward the railroad tracks and home.

BY THE TIME you reach Copperhead, clouds have settled in and gray snow spits from the lowering sky.

Standing breathlessly in the street across from the commissary, you watch Pap and three other men stride down the tracks toward the railway station by Janey's Saloon. They carry long rifles cradled in their arms. Twenty yards behind them follows a ragged

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crescent of ten or eleven armed men. Cade is among them, his face pale and thin, so young-looking. From the other direction, a loose band of men led by Granville Snidow walks up the tracks. Snidow's palms rest easily on the pearl-handled revolvers that ride low on his hips. His hatchet face is still and expressionless.

When they are ten or fifteen yards apart, the two camps stop to study one another. Both groups of men shift restlessly about. Fingers curl white around the stocks of shotguns and rifles. Pap and Snidow alone stand motionless, facing one another.

In the stillness, you can hear the wind sough among the trees in the hollers. Across the street, a curtain twitches in the commissary window and your eyes are drawn to your mama's face, peering through the glass at the gloomy afternoon.

And then Pap's voice, loud in the silence, draws your attention back to the cluster of men in the street.

Granville, Pap says. He inclines his head, the barest nod.

Well, Granville says. To listen to the talk at Janey's last night, I'd have thought there'd have been more of you today.

I reckon there's enough of us, Pap says. We don't want no trouble. But we don't aim to leave our homes —

Those are the last words spoken. You're not sure who has fired the first shot, or why, but suddenly the afternoon is shattered by a staccato burst of gunfire: the deep-throated boom of shotguns intermixed with the long flat cracks of rifles and the sharp reports of Granville Snidow's pistols, popping over and over again.

The two clumps of men seem to explode in all directions. Men dive to the earth and dart away to the edges of the street. In the confusion of smoke and gunfire and moving bodies, you search for Cade, but you don't see him.

And then, as suddenly as it began, it is over. The acrid tang of burned powder hangs in the air. Granville Snidow stands alone in the midst of the crumpled bodies, a pistol in either hand. Smoke drifts along the silent street.

Pap! you cry. Cade!

The shout decays into a long rattling cough and then you are running toward the middle of the street. Your short legs plow through the gray snow. Pap writhes on the tracks by his rifle, cursing and clutching at his leg. But Cade is still. He lies several yards beyond Pap, flat on his back with his arms

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flung wide as if to embrace you. His face is the color of ashes against the leaden snow and blood bubbles at his lips.

Cade! you cry again, your voice breaking.

You go to your knees in the snow beside him, cradle his head in your lap. Blood boils out of a ragged hole in his chest. Every time he sucks in a breath, the hole whistles like a tea kettle when the water begins to boil.

Cade, you say. Cade.

And Cade opens his eyes, those eyes so blue they are like the clear blue ice that forms along the edge of the commissary roof. Well now, Jorey, Cade says, lifting his head. Don't this beat all?

He tries to laugh, but the laugh turns into an explosive cough. A thin spray of blood coats your flannel jacket, and Cade's head drops back, his eyes going dark.

Dead as the eyes of the squirrel.

Just then you hear the crack of heels against the ties behind you, and Mama screams from the commissary porch, No! No!

You twist your head around to see Granville Snidow, still clutching a pistol in either hand, wearing a kind of terrible expression like you've never seen on any adult's face. He is so pale and haggard that even his mustache seems to droop. His eyes gleam from dark hollows.

No! Mama screams.

But Granville Snidow lurches a step closer. Oh, Christ, kid, he whispers. Oh, Christ, I'm sorry, I —

He raises his arms to the sky, and a bloody flower blossoms in the center of his chest. There is a hollow echoing boom and Granville Snidow pitches forward, his body thrashing in the snow. Behind him, you see Pap, half-upright, his wounded leg drawn up beneath him, still clutching his smoking rifle.

Jesus, Pap says, and then he, too, pitches forward, dropping the rifle and curling tight around his leg.

Jorey! Mama screams. Jorey!

Looking around, you see her descend the porch steps. You glance down at Cade, remembering all those days when he sat with you in your special place, just being with you the way he always was, not even caring that you were stupid the way the other kids cared, the way Mama cared. That was the way Cade was. Just Cade.

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No, you whisper, and the memory of the squirrel, twisting and twisting in your hands, returns to you.

You can feel it again, that power, that touch. It surges through your body until your nerves sing, tingles down your arms and through your hands. Your fingers flush with electric heat, so hot they seem to glow, and then, almost of their own accord, they flex in Cade's blond hair. The touch jerks through them. Cade's eyelids twitch and flicker open, and you know you can do it.

You can bring him back. You know you can.

But just then, you hear Mama, her voice shrill in the silence as she crosses the rutted street, Mama, crying, Jorey! Jorey! Is Cade okay?

The sour taste of bile floods your mouth, and you jerk away from Cade, your hands and fingers going suddenly numb in the cold. His eyelids close again and his head lolls back along his shoulder. Blood drips from his open mouth, melting the gray snow.

Then Mama is standing before you.

Cade's dead, you say.

Mama sobs. Oh, Jorey, she says. Oh, Jorey.

But her voice is different somehow. There is a hint of something warm and rich in that voice, as if it might someday sound all full up, the way it used to sound for Cade. And it can be for you. Just you. It always can be.

For the rest of your life, this moment will stand apart in time, as stark and memorable as a glimpse of wind-lashed trees along the ridge-tops, frozen against the sky by a sudden flash of lightning. In that timeless instant, you sob out your grief and joy — for some new loneliness, some irrevocable loss that you will never understand no matter how hard you try; for some old hollowness within you, forever filled. At last, the sob breaks, becomes the unceasing cough that has been with you for days now. And coughing, you stand. Stand and step over Cade's body to clutch her fiercely, to press your face tight into her warm skirts.

Oh, Mama, you say. And again: Oh, Mama.

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Walter Jon Williams provides the cornerstone story for this issue. "Wall, Stone, Craft" is an alternate history story with a focus on the literary — its main character is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of Frankenstein. *(See the editorial for a short course in the actual history.) This novella is a tour de force look at the history and literature of the early 19th century.*

Walter's Nebula-nominated short fiction has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and in various anthologies. His most recent novel,* Aristoi, *has just appeared from Tor.*

Wall, Stone, Craft

By Walter Jon Williams

One

SHE AWOKE, THERE IN THE common room of the inn, from a brief dream of roses and death. Once Mary came awake she recalled there were wild roses on her mother's grave, and wondered if her mother's spirit had visited her.

On her mother's grave, Mary's lover had first proposed their elopement. It was there the two of them had first made love.

Now she believed she was pregnant. Her lover was of the opinion that she was mistaken. That was about where it stood.

Mary concluded that it was best not to think about it. And so, blinking sleep from her eyes, she sat in the common room of the inn at Le Caillou and resolved to study her Italian grammar by candlelight.

Plurals. *La nascita, le nascite. La madre, le madri. Un bambino, i bambini...*

Interruption: stampings, snortings, the rattle of harness, the barking of dogs. Four young Englishmen entered the inn, one in scarlet uniform coat,

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the others in fine traveling clothes. Raindrops dazzled on their shoulders. The innkeeper bustled out from the kitchen, smiled, proffered the register.

Mary, unimpressed by anything English, concentrated on the grammar.

"Let me sign, George," the redcoat said. "My hand needs the practice."

Mary glanced up at the comment.

"I say, George, here's a fellow signed in Greek!" The Englishman peered at yellowed pages of the inn's register, trying to make out the words in the dim light of the innkeeper's lamp. Mary smiled at the English officer's efforts.

"Perseus, I believe the name is. Perseus Busseus — d'ye suppose he means Bishop? — Kselleius. And he gives his occupation as 'te anthropou philou' — that would make him a friendly fellow, eh? — " The officer looked over his shoulder and grinned, then returned to the register. "'Kai atheos.'" The officer scowled, then straightened. "Does that mean what I think it does, George?"

George — the pretty auburn-haired man in byrons — shook rain off his short cape, stepped to the register, examined the text. "Not 'friendly fellow,'" he said. "That would be 'anehr philos.' 'Anthropos' is mankind, not man." There was the faintest touch of Scotland in his speech.

"So it is," said the officer. "It comes back now."

George bent at his slim waist and looked carefully at the register. "What the fellow says is, 'Both friend of man and — '" He frowned, then looked at his friend. "You were right about the 'atheist,' I'm afraid."

The officer was indignant. "Ain't funny, George," he said.

George gave a cynical little half-smile. His voice changed, turned comical and fussy, became that of a high-pitched English schoolmaster. "Let us try to make out the name of this famous atheist." He bent over the register again. "Perseus — you had that right, Somerset. Busseus — how *very* irregular. Kselleius — Kelly? Shelley?" He smiled at his friend. His voice became very Irish. "Kelly, I imagine. An atheistical upstart Irish schoolmaster with a little Greek. But what the Busseus might be eludes me, unless his middle name is Omnibus."

Somerset chuckled. Mary rose from her place and walked quietly toward the pair. "The gentleman's name is Bysshe, sir," she said. "Percy Bysshe Shelley."

The two men turned in surprise. The officer — Somerset — bowed as he perceived a lady. Mary saw for the first time that he had one empty sleeve

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pinned across his tunic, which would account for the comment about the hand. The other — George, the man in byrons — swept off his hat and gave Mary a flourishing bow, one far too theatrical to be taken seriously. When he straightened, he gave Mary a little frown.

"Bysshe Shelley?" he said. "Any relation to Sir Bysshe, the baronet?"

"His grandson."

"Sir Bysshe is a protegé of old Norfolk." This an aside to his friends. Radical Whiggery was afoot, or so the tone implied. George returned his attention to Mary as the other Englishmen gathered about her. "An interesting family, no doubt," he said, and smiled at her. Mary wanted to flinch from the compelling way he looked at her, gazed upward, intently, from beneath his brows. "And are you of his party?"

"I am."

"And you are, I take it, Mrs. Shelley?"

Mary straightened and gazed defiantly into George's eyes. "Mrs. Shelley resides in England. My name is Godwin."

George's eyes widened, flickered a little. Low English murmurs came to Mary's ears. George bowed again. "Charmed to meet you, Miss Godwin."

George pointed to each of his companions with his hat. "Lord Fitzroy Somerset." The armless man bowed again. "Captain Harry Smith. Captain Austen of the Navy. Pásmány, my fencing master." Most of the party, Mary thought, were young, and all were handsome, George most of all. George turned to Mary again, a little smile of anticipation curling his lips. His burning look was almost insolent. "My name is Newstead."

Mortal embarrassment clutched at Mary's heart. She knew her cheeks were burning, but still she held George's eyes as she bobbed a curtsey.

George had not been Marquess Newstead for more than a few months. He had been famous for years both as an intimate of the Prince Regent and the most dashing of Wellington's cavalry officers, but it was his exploits on the field of Waterloo and his capture of Napoleon on the bridge at Genappe that had made him immortal. He was the talk of England and the Continent, though he had achieved his fame under another name.

Before the Prince Regent had given him the title of Newstead, auburn-haired, insolent-eyed George had been known as George Gordon Noël, the sixth Lord Byron.

Mary decided she was not going to be impressed by either his titles or his

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manner. She decided she would think of him as George.

"Pleased to meet you, my lord," Mary said. Pride steeled her as she realized her voice hadn't trembled.

She was spared further embarrassment when the door burst open and a servant entered followed by a pack of muddy dogs — whippets — who showered them all with water, then howled and bounded about George, their master. Standing tall, his strong, well-formed legs in the famous side-laced boots that he had invented to show off his calf and ankle, George laughed as the dogs jumped up on his chest and bayed for attention. His lordship barked back at them and wrestled with them for a moment — not very lordlike, Mary thought — and then he told his dogs to be still. At first they ignored him, but eventually he got them down and silenced.

He looked up at Mary. "I can discipline men, Miss Godwin," he said, "but I'm afraid I'm not very good with animals."

"That shows you have a kind heart, I'm sure," Mary said.

The others laughed a bit at this — apparently kindheartedness was not one of George's better-known qualities — but George smiled indulgently.

"Have you and your companion supped, Miss Godwin? I would welcome the company of fellow English in this tiresome land of Brabant."

Mary was unable to resist an impertinence. "Even if one of them is an atheistical upstart Irish schoolmaster?"

"Miss Godwin, I would dine with Wolfe Tone himself." Still with that intent, under-eyed look, as if he was dissecting her.

Mary was relieved to turn away from George's gaze and look toward the back of the inn, in the direction of the kitchen. "Bysshe is in the kitchen giving instructions to the cook. I believe my sister is with him."

"Are there more in your party?"

"Only the three of us. And one rather elderly carriage horse."

"Forgive us if we do not invite the horse to table."

"Your ape, George," Somerset said dolefully, "will be quite enough."

Mary would have pursued this interesting remark, but at that moment Bysshe and Claire appeared from out of the kitchen passage. Both were laughing, as if at a shared secret, and Claire's black eyes glittered. Mary repressed a spasm of annoyance.

"Mary!" Bysshe said. "The cook told us a ghost story!" He was about to go on, but paused as he saw the visitors.

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"We have an invitation to dinner," Mary said. "Lord Newstead has been kind enough — "

"Newstead!" said Claire. "*The* Lord Newstead?"

George turned his searching gaze on Claire. "I'm the only Newstead I know."

Mary felt a chill of alarm, for a moment seeing Claire as George doubtless saw her: black-haired, black-eyed, fatally indiscreet, and all of sixteen.

Sometimes the year's difference in age between Mary and Claire seemed a century.

"Lord Newstead!" Claire babbled. "I recognize you now! How exciting to meet you!"

Mary resigned herself to fate. "My lord," she said, "may I present my sister, Miss Jane — Claire, rather, Claire Clairmont, and Mr. Shelley."

"Overwhelmed and charmed, Miss Clairmont. Mr. Perseus Omnibus Kselleius, tí kánete?"

Bysshe blinked for a second or two, then grinned. "Thanmásia eùxaristô," returning politeness, "kaí eseîs?"

For a moment Mary gloried in Bysshe, in his big frame in his shabby clothes, his fair, disordered hair, his freckles, his large hands — and his absolute disinclination to be impressed by one of the most famous men on Earth.

George searched his mind for a moment. "Polú kalá, eùxaristô. Thá éthela ná — " He groped for words, then gave a laugh. "Hang the Greek!" he said. "It's been far too many years since Trinity. May I present my friend Somerset?"

Somerset gave the atheist a cold Christian eye. "How d'ye do?"

George finished his introductions. There was the snapping of coach whips outside, and the sound of more stamping horses. The dogs began barking again. At least two more coaches had arrived. George led the party into the dining room. Mary found herself sitting next to George, with Claire and Bysshe across the table.

"Damme, I quite forgot to register," Somerset said, rising from his bench. "What bed will you settle for, George?"

"Nothing less than Bonaparte's."

Somerset sighed. "I thought not," he said.

"Did Bonaparte sleep here in Le Caillou?" Claire asked.

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"The night before Waterloo."

"How exciting! Is Waterloo nearby?" She looked at Bysshe. "Had we known, we could have asked for his room."

"Which we then would have had to surrender to my lord Newstead," Bysshe said tolerantly. "He has greater claim, after all, than we."

George gave Mary his intent look again. His voice was pitched low. "I would not deprive two lovely ladies of their bed for all the Bonapartes in Europe."

But rather join us in it, Mary thought. That look was clear enough.

The rest of George's party — servants, aides-de-camp, clerks, one black man in full Mameluke fig, turned-up slippers, ostrich plumes, scarlet turban and all — carried George's equipage from his carriages. In addition to an endless series of trunks and a large miscellany of weaponry there were more animals. Not only the promised ape — actually a large monkey, which seated itself on George's shoulder — but brightly-colored parrots in cages, a pair of greyhounds, some hooded hunting hawks, songbirds, two forlorn-looking kit foxes in cages, which set all the dogs howling and jumping in eagerness to get at them, and a half-grown panther in a jewelled collar, which the dogs knew better than to bark at. The innkeeper was loud in his complaint as he attempted to sort them all out and stay outside of the range of beaks, claws, and fangs.

Bysshe watched with bright eyes, enjoying the spectacle. George's friends looked as if they were weary of it.

"I hope we will sleep tonight," Mary said.

"If you sleep not," said George, playing with the monkey, "we shall contrive to keep you entertained."

How gracious to include your friends in the orgy, Mary thought. But once again kept silent.

Bysshe was still enjoying the parade of frolicking animals. He glanced at Mary. "Don't you think, Maie, this is the very image of philosophical anarchism?"

"You are welcome to it, sir," said Somerset, returning from the register. "George, your mastiff has injured the ostler's dog. He is loud in his complaint."

"I'll have Ferrante pay him off."

"See that you do. And have him pistol the brains out of that mastiff while

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he's at it."

"Injure poor Picton?" George was offended. "I'll have none of it."

"Poor Picton will have his fangs in the ostler next."

"He must have been teasing the poor beast."

"Picton will kill us all one day." Grudgingly.

"Forgive us, Somerset-laddie." Mary watched as George reached over to Somerset and tweaked his ear. Somerset reddened but seemed pleased.

"Mr. Shelley," said Captain Austen. "I wonder if you know what surprises the kitchen has in store for us."

Austen was a well-built man in a plain black coat, older than the others, with a lined and weathered naval face and a reserved manner unique in this company.

"Board 'em in the smoke! That's the Navy for you!" George said. "Straight to the business of eating, never mind the other nonsense."

"If you ate wormy biscuit for twenty years of war," said Harry Smith, "you'd care about the food as well."

Bysshe gave Austen a smile. "The provisions seem adequate enough for a country inn," he said. "And the rooms are clean, unlike most in this country. Claire and the Maie and I do not eat meat, so I had to tell the cook how to prepare our dinner. But if your taste runs to fowl or something in the cutlet line I daresay the cook can set you up."

"No meat!" George seemed enthralled by the concept. "Disciples of J.F. Newton, as I take it?"

"Among others," said Mary.

"But are you well? Do you not feel an enervation? Are you not feverish with lack of a proper diet?" George leaned very close and touched Mary's forehead with the back of one cool hand while he reached to find her pulse with the other. The monkey grimaced at her from his shoulder. Mary disengaged and placed her hands on the table.

"I'm quite well, I assure you," she said.

"The Maie's health is far better than when I met her," Bysshe said.

"Mine too," said Claire.

"I believe most diseases can be conquered by proper diet," said Bysshe. And then he added,

"He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,
And horribly devours his mangled flesh."

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"Let's have some mangled flesh tonight, George," said Somerset gaily.

"Do let's," added Smith.

George's hand remained on Mary's forehead. His voice was very soft. "If eating flesh offend thee," he said, "I will eat but only greens."

Mary could feel her hackles rise. "Order what you please," she said. "I don't care one way or another."

"Brava, Miss Godwin!" said Smith thankfully. "Let it be mangled flesh for us all, and to perdition with all those little Low Country cabbages!"

"I don't like them, either," said Claire.

George removed his hand from Mary's forehead and tried to signal the innkeeper, who was still struggling to corral the dogs. George failed, frowned, and lowered his hand.

"I'm cheered to know you're familiar with the works of Newton," Bysshe said.

"I wouldn't say *familiar*," said George. He was still trying to signal the innkeeper. "I haven't read his books. But I know he wants me not to eat meat, and that's all I need to know."

Bysshe folded his big hands on the table. "Oh, there's much more than that. Abstaining from meat implies an entire new moral order, in which mankind is placed on an equal level with the animals."

"George in particular should appreciate that," said Harry Smith, and made a face at the monkey.

"I think I prefer being ranked above the animals," George said. "And above most people, too." He looked up at Bysshe. "Shall we avoid talk of food matters before we eat? My stomach's rumbling louder than a battery of Napoleon's daughters." He looked down at the monkey and assumed a high-pitched Scots dowager's voice. "An' sae is Jerome Bonaparte's, annit nae, Jerome?"

George finally succeeded in attracting the innkeeper's attention and the company ordered food and wine. Bread, cheese, and pickles were brought to tide them over in the meantime. Jerome Bonaparte was permitted off his master's lap to roam free along the table and eat what he wished.

George watched as Bysshe carved a piece of cheese for himself. "In addition to Newton, you would also be a follower of William Godwin?"

Bysshe gave Mary a glance, then nodded. "Ay. Godwin also."

"I thought I recognized that 'philosophical anarchism' of yours. Godwin

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was the rage when I was at Harrow. But not so much thought of now, eh? Excepting of course his lovely namesake." Turning his gaze to Mary.

Mary gave him a cold look. "Truth is ever in fashion, my lord," she said.

"Did you say *ever* or *never*?" Playfully. Mary said nothing, and George gave a shrug. "Truthful Master Godwin, then. And who else?"

"Ovid," Mary said. The officers looked a little serious at this. She smiled. "Come now — he's not as scandalous as he's been made out. Merely playful."

This did not reassure her audience. Bysshe offered Mary a private smile. "We've also been reading Mary Wollstonecraft."

"Ah!" George cried. "Heaven save us from intellectual women!"

"Mary Wollstonecraft," said Somerset thoughtfully. "She was a harlot in France, was she not?"

"I prefer to think of my mother," said Mary carefully, "as a political thinker and authoress."

There was sudden silence as Somerset turned white with mortification. Then George threw back his head and laughed.

"Sunburn me!" he said. "That answers as you deserve!"

Somerset visibly made an effort to collect his wits. "I am most sorry, Miss — " he began.

George laughed again. "By heaven, we'll watch our words hereafter!"

Claire tittered. "I was in suspense, wondering if there would be a mishap. And there was, there *was!*"

George turned to Mary and managed to compose his face into an attitude of solemnity, though the amusement that danced in his eyes denied it.

"I sincerely apologize on behalf of us all, Miss Godwin. We are soldiers and are accustomed to speaking rough among ourselves, and have been abroad and are doubtless ignorant of the true worth of any individual — " He searched his mind for a moment, trying to work out a graceful way to conclude. " — outside of our own little circle," he finished.

"Well said," said Mary, "and accepted." She had chosen more interesting ground on which to make her stand.

"Oh yes!" said Claire. "Well said indeed!"

"My mother is not much understood by the public," Mary continued. "But intellectual women, it would seem, are not much understood by *you.*"

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George leaned away from Mary and scanned her with cold eyes. "On the contrary," he said. "I am married to an intellectual woman."

"And she, I imagine... " Mary let the pause hang in the air for a moment, like a rapier before it strikes home. "...resides in England?"

George scowled. "She does."

"I'm sure she has her books to keep her company."

"And Francis Bacon," George said, his voice sour. "Annabella is an authority on Francis Bacon. And she is welcome to reform *him*, if she likes."

Mary smiled at him. "Who keeps *you* company, my lord?"

There was a stir among his friends. He gave her that insolent, under-eyed look again.

"I am not often lonely," he said.

"Tonight you will rest with the ghost of Napoleon," she said. "Which of you has better claim to that bed?"

George gave a cold little laugh. "I believe that was decided at Waterloo."

"The Duke's victory, or so I've heard."

George's friends were giving each other alarmed looks. Mary decided she had drawn enough Byron blood. She took a piece of cheese.

"Tell us about Waterloo!" Claire insisted. "Is it far from here?"

"The field is a mile or so north," said Somerset. He seemed relieved to turn to the subject of battles. "I had thought perhaps you were English tourists come to visit the site."

"Our arrival is coincidence," Bysshe said. He was looking at Mary narrow-eyed, as if he was trying to work something out. "I'm somewhat embarrassed for funds, and I'm in hope of finding a letter at Brussels from my — " He began to say "wife," but changed the word to "family."

"We're on our way to Vienna," Smith said.

"The long way 'round," said Somerset. "It's grown unsafe in Paris — too many old Bonapartists lurking with guns and bombs, and of course George is the laddie they hate most. So we're off to join the Duke as diplomats, but we plan to meet with his highness of Orange along the way. In Brussels, in two days' time."

"Good old Slender Billy!" said Smith. "I haven't seen him since the battle."

"The battle!" said Claire. "You said you would tell us!"

George gave her an irritated look. "Please, Miss Clairmont, I beg you.

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No battles before dinner." His stomach rumbled audibly.

"Bysshe," said Mary, "didn't you say the cook had told you a ghost story?"

"A good one, too," said Bysshe. "It happened in the house across the road, the one with the tile roof. A pair of old witches used to live there. Sisters." He looked up at George. "We may have ghosts before dinner, may we not?"

"For all of me, you may."

"They dealt in charms and curses and so on, and made a living supplying the, ah, the supernatural needs of the district. It so happened that two different men had fallen in love with the same girl, and each man applied to one of the weird sisters for a love charm — each to a different sister, you see. One of them used his spell first and won the heart of the maiden, and this drove the other suitor into a rage. So he went to the witch who had sold him his charm, and demanded she change the young lady's mind. When the witch insisted it was impossible, he drew his pistol and shot her dead."

"How very un-Belgian of him," drawled Smith.

Bysshe continued unperturbed. "So quick as a wink," he said, "the dead witch's sister seized a heavy kitchen cleaver and cut off the young man's head with a single stroke. The head fell to the floor and bounced out the porch steps. And ever since that night — " He leaned across the table toward Mary, his voice dropping dramatically. " — people in the house have sometimes heard a thumping noise, and seen the *suitor's head, dripping gore, bouncing down the steps!*"

Mary and Bysshe shared a delicious shiver. George gave Bysshe a thoughtful look.

"D'ye credit this sort of thing, Mr. Omnibus?"

Bysshe looked up. "Oh yes. I have a great belief in things supernatural."

George gave an insolent smile, and Mary's heart quickened as she recognized a trap.

"Then how can you be an atheist?" George asked.

Bysshe was startled. No one had ever asked him this question before. He gave a nervous laugh. "I am not so much opposed to God," he said, "as I am a worshipper of Galileo and Newton. And of course an enemy of the established Church."

"I see."

A little smile drifted across Bysshe's lips.

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"Yes!" he said, "I have seen God's worshippers unsheathe
The sword of his revenge, when grace descended,
Confirming all unnatural impulses,
To satisfy their desolating deeds;
And frantic priests waved the ill-omened cross
O'er the unhappy earth; then shone the sun
On showers of gore from the upflashing steel
Of safe assassin — "

"And *have* you seen such?" George's look was piercing.

Bysshe blinked at him. "Beg pardon?"

"I asked if you *had* seen showers of gore, upflashing steel, all that sort of thing."

"Ah. No." He offered George a half-apologetic smile. "I do not hold warfare consonant with my principles."

"Yes." George's stomach rumbled once more. "It's rather more in my line than yours. So I think I am probably better qualified to judge it..." His lip twisted. "...*and* your principles."

Mary felt her hackles rise. "Surely you don't dispute that warfare is a great evil," she said. "And that the church blesses war and its outcome."

"The church — " He waved a hand. "The chaplains we had with us in Spain were fine men and did good work, from what I could see. Though we had damn few of them, as for the most part they preferred to judge war from their comfortable beds at home. And as for war — ay, it's evil. Yes. Among other things."

"Among other things!" Mary was outraged. "What other things?"

George looked at each of the officers in turn, then at Mary. "War is an abomination, I think we can all agree. But it is also an occasion for all that is great in mankind. Courage, comradeship, sacrifice. Heroism and nobility beyond the scope of imagination."

"Glory," said one-armed Somerset helpfully.

"Death!" snapped Mary. "Hideous, lingering death! Disease. Mutilation!" She realized she had stepped a little far, and bobbed her head toward Somerset, silently begging his pardon for bringing up his disfigurement. "Endless suffering among the starving widows and orphans," she went on. "Early this year Bysshe and Jane and I walked across the part of France that the armies had marched over. It was a desert, my lord. Whole villages without

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a single soul. Women, children, and cripples in rags. Many without a roof over their head."

"Ay," said Harry Smith. "We saw it in Spain, all of us."

"Miss Godwin," said George, "those poor French people have my sympathy as well as yours. But if a nation is going to murder its rightful king, elect a tyrant, and attack every other nation in the world, then it can but expect to receive that which it giveth. I reserve far greater sympathy for the poor orphans and widows of Spain, Portugal, and the Low Countries."

"And England," said Captain Austen.

"Ay," said George, "and England."

"I did not say that England has not suffered," said Mary. "Anyone with eyes can see the victims of the war. And the victims of the Corn Bill as well."

"Enough." George threw up his hands. "I heard enough debate on the Corn Bill in the House of Lords — I beg you, not here."

"People are starving, my lord," Mary said quietly.

"But thanks to Waterloo," George said, "they at least starve in peace."

"Here's our flesh!" said a relieved Harry Smith. Napkins flourished, silverware rattled, the dinner was laid down. Bysshe took a bite of his cheese pie, then sampled one of the little Brabant cabbages and gave a freckled smile — he had not, as had Mary, grown tired of them. Smith, Somerset, and George chatted about various Army acquaintances, and the others ate in silence. Somerset, Mary noticed, had come equipped with a combination knife-and-fork and managed his cutlet efficiently.

George, she noted, ate only a little, despite the grumblings of his stomach.

"Is it not to your taste, my lord?" she asked.

"My appetite is off." Shortly.

"That light cavalry figure don't come without sacrifice," said Smith. "I'm an infantryman, though," brandishing knife and fork, "and can tuck in to my vittles."

George gave him an irritated glance and sipped at his hock. "Cavalry, infantry, Senior Service, staff," he said, pointing at himself, Smith, Austen, and Somerset with his fork. The fork swung to Bysshe. "Do you, sir, have an occupation? Besides being atheistical, I mean."

Bysshe put down his knife and fork and answered deliberately. "I have been a scientist, and a reformer, and a sort of an engineer. I have now taken

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up poetry."

"I didn't know it was something to be *taken up,*" said George.

"Captain Austen's sister does something in the literary line, I believe," Harry Smith said.

Austen gave a little shake of his head. "Please, Harry. Not here."

"I know she publishes anonymously, but — "

"She doesn't want it known," firmly, "and I prefer her wishes be respected."

Smith gave Austen an apologetic look. "Sorry, Frank."

Mary watched Austen's distress with amusement. Austen had a spinster sister, she supposed — she could just imagine the type — who probably wrote ripe horrid Gothic novels, all terror and dark battlements and cloaked sensuality, all to the constant mortification of the family.

Well, Mary thought. She should be charitable. Perhaps they were good.

She and Bysshe liked a good gothic, when they were in the mood. Bysshe had even written a couple, when he was fifteen or so.

George turned to Bysshe. "That was your own verse you quoted?"

"Yes."

"I thought perhaps it was, as I hadn't recognized it."

"*Queen Mab,*" said Claire. "It's *very* good." She gave Bysshe a look of adoration that sent a weary despairing cry through Mary's nerves. "It's got all Bysshe's ideas in it," she said.

"And the publisher?"

"I published it myself," Bysshe said, "in an edition of seventy copies."

George raised an eyebrow. "A self-published phenomenon, forsooth. But why so few?"

"The poem is a political statement in accordance with Mr. Godwin's *Political Justice.* Were it widely circulated, the government might act to suppress it, and to prosecute the publisher." He gave a shudder. "With people like Lord Ellenborough in office, I think it best to take no chances."

"Lord Ellenborough is a great man," said Captain Austen firmly. Mary was surprised at his emphatic tone. "He led for Mr. Warren Hastings, do you know, during his trial, and that trial lasted seven years or more and ended in acquittal. Governor Hastings did me many a good turn in India — he was the making of me. I'm sure I owe Lord Ellenborough my purest gratitude."

Bysshe gave Austen a serious look. "Lord Ellenborough sent Daniel

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Eaton to prison for publishing Thomas Paine," he said. "And he sent Leigh Hunt to prison for publishing the truth about the Prince Regent."

"One an atheist," Austen scowled, "the other a pamphleteer."

"Why, so am I both," said Bysshe sweetly, and, smiling, sipped his spring water. Mary wanted to clap aloud.

"It is the duty of the Lord Chief Justice to guard the realm from subversion," said Somerset. "We were at war, you know."

"We are no longer at war," said Bysshe, "and Lord Ellenborough still sends good folk to prison."

"At least," said Mary, "he can no longer accuse reformers of being Jacobins. Not with France under the Bourbons again."

"Of course he can," Bysshe said. "Reform is an idea, and Jacobinism is an idea, and Ellenborough conceives them the same."

"But are they not?" George said.

Mary's temper flared. "Are you serious? Comparing those who seek to correct injustice with those who — "

"Who cut the heads off everyone with whom they disagreed?" George interrupted. "I'm perfectly serious. Robespierre was the very type of reformer — virtuous, sober, sedate, educated, a spotless private life. And how many thousands did he murder?" He jabbed his fork at Bysshe again, and Mary restrained the impulse to slap it out of his hand. "You may not like Ellenborough's sentencing, but a few hours in the pillory or a few months in prison ain't the same as beheading. And that's what reform in England would come to in the end — mobs and demagogues heaping up death, and then a dictator like Cromwell, or worse luck Bonaparte, to end liberty for a whole generation."

"I do not look to the French for a model," said Bysshe, "but rather to America."

"So did the French," said George, "and look what *they* got."

"If France had not desperately needed reform," Bysshe said, "there would have been nothing so violent as their revolution. If England reforms itself, there need be no violence."

"Ah. So if the government simply resigns, and frame-breakers and agitators and democratic philosophers and wandering poets take their place, then things shall be well in England."

"Things will be better in any case," Bysshe said quietly, "than they are now."

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"Exactly!" Claire said.

George gave his companions a knowing look. *See how I humor this vagabond?* Mary read. Loathing stirred her heart.

Bysshe could read a look as well as Mary. His face darkened. "Please understand me," he said. "I do not look for immediate change, nor do I preach violent revolution. Mr. Godwin has corrected that error in my thought. There will be little amendment for years to come. But Ellenborough is old, and the King is old and mad, and the Regent and his loathsome brothers are not young..." He smiled. "I will outlive them, will I not?"

George looked at him. "Will you outlive me, sir? I am not yet thirty."

"I am three-and-twenty." Mildly. "I believe the odds favor me."

Bysshe and the others laughed, while George looked cynical and dyspeptic. *Used to being the young cavalier,* Mary thought. *He's not so young any longer — how much longer will that pretty face last?*

"And of course advance of science may turn this debate irrelevant," Bysshe went on. "Mr. Godwin calculates that with the use of mechanical aids, people may reduce their daily labor to an hour or two, to the general benefit of all."

"But you oppose such machines, don't ye?" George said. "You support the Luddites, I assume?"

"Ay, but — "

"And the frame-breakers are destroying the machines that have taken their livelihood, aren't they? So where is your general benefit, then?"

Mary couldn't hold it in any longer. She slapped her hand down on the table, and George and Bysshe started. "The riots occur because the profits of the looms were not used to benefit the weavers, but to enrich the mill owners! Were the owners to share their profits with the weavers, there would have been no disorder."

George gave her a civil bow. "Your view of human nature is generous," he said, "if you expect a mill owner to support the families of those who are not even his employees."

"It would be for the good of all, wouldn't it?" Bysshe said. "If he does not want his mills threatened and frames broken."

"It sounds like extortion wrapped in pretty philosophy."

"The mill owners will pay one way or another," Mary pointed out. "They can pay taxes to the government to suppress the Luddites with militia

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and dragoons, or they can have the goodwill of the people, and let the swords and muskets rust."

"They will buy the swords every time," George said. "They are useful in ways other than suppressing disorder, such as securing trade routes and the safety of the nation." He put on a benevolent face. "You must forgive me, but your view of humanity is too benign. You do not account for the violence and passion that are in the very heart of man, and which institutions such as law and religion are intended to help control. And when science serves the passions, only tragedy can result — when I think of science, I think of the science of Dr. Guillotin."

"We are fallen," said Captain Austen. "Eden will never be within our grasp."

"The passions are a problem, but I think they can be turned to good," said Bysshe. "That is —" He gave an apologetic smile. "That is the aim of my current work. To use the means of poetry to channel the passions to a humane and beneficent aim."

"I offer you my very best wishes," condescendingly, "but I fear mankind will disappoint you. Passions are —" George gave Mary an insolent, knowing smile. "—are the downfall of many a fine young virtue."

Mary considered hitting him in the face. Bysshe seemed not to have noticed George's look, nor Mary's reaction. "Mr. Godwin ventured the thought that dreams are the source of many irrational passions," he mused. "He believes that should we ever find a way of doing without sleep, the passions would fall away."

"Ay!" barked George. "Through enervation, if nothing else."

The others laughed. Mary decided she had had enough, and rose.

"I shall withdraw," she said. "The journey has been fatiguing."

The gentlemen, Bysshe excepted, rose to their feet. "Good night, Maie," he said. "I will stay for a while, I think."

"As you like, Bysshe." Mary looked at her sister. "Jane? I mean Claire? Will you come with me?"

"Oh, no." Quickly. "I'm not at all tired."

Annoyance stiffened Mary's spine. "As you like," she said.

George bowed toward her, picked a candle off the table, and offered her an arm. "May I light you up the stair? I should like to apologize for my temerity in contradicting such a charming lady." He offered his brightest

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smile. "I think *my* poor virtue will extend that far, yes?"

She looked at him coldly — she couldn't think it customary, even in George's circles, to escort a woman to her bedroom.

Damn it anyway. "My lord," she said, and put her arm through his.

Jerome Bonaparte made a flying leap from the table and landed on George's shoulder. It clung to his long auburn hair, screamed, and made a face, and the others laughed. Mary considered the thought of being escorted up to bed by a lord and a monkey, and it improved her humor.

"Goodnight, gentlemen," Mary said. "Claire."

The gentlemen reseated themselves and George took Mary up the stairs. They were so narrow and steep that they couldn't go up abreast; George, with the candle, went first, and Mary, holding his hand, came up behind. Her door was the first up the stairs; she put her hand on the wooden door handle and turned to face her escort. The monkey leered at her from his shoulder.

"I thank you for your company, my lord," she said. "I fear your journey was a little short."

"I wished a word with you," softly, "a little apart from the others."

Mary stiffened. To her annoyance her heart gave a lurch. "What word is that?" she asked.

His expression was all affability. "I am sensible to the difficulties that you and your sister must be having. Without money in a foreign country, and with your only protector a man — " He hesitated. Jerome Bonaparte, jealous for his attention, tugged at his hair. "A charming man of noble ideals, surely, but without money."

"I thank you for your concern, but it is misplaced," Mary said. "Claire and I are perfectly well."

"Your health ain't my worry," he said. Was he deliberately misunderstanding? Mary wondered in fury. "I worry for your future — you are on an adventure with a man who cannot support you, cannot see you safe home, cannot marry you."

"Bysshe and I do not wish to marry." The words caught at her heart. "We are free."

"And the damage to your reputation in society — " he began, and came up short when she burst into laughter. He looked severe, while the monkey mocked him from his shoulder. "You may laugh now, Miss Godwin, but there are those who will use this adventure against you. Political enemies of

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your father at the very least."

"That isn't why I was laughing. I am the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft — I *have* no reputation! It's like being the natural daughter of Lucifer and the Scarlet Woman of Babylon. Nothing is expected of us, nothing at all. Society has given us license to do as we please. We were dead to them from birth."

He gave her a narrow look. "But you have at least a little concern for the proprieties — why else travel pseudonymously?"

Mary looked at him in surprise. "What d'you mean?"

He smiled. "Give me a little credit, Miss Godwin. When you call your sister *Jane* half the time, and your protector calls you *May*..."

Mary laughed again. "*The* Maie — Maie for short — is one of Bysshe's pet names for me. The other is Pecksie."

"Oh."

"And Jane is my sister's given name, which she has always hated. Last year she decided to call herself Clara or Claire — this week it is Claire."

Jerome Bonaparte began to yank at George's ear, and George made a face, pulled the monkey from his shoulder, and shook it with mock ferocity. Again he spoke in the cracked Scots dowager's voice. "Are ye sae donsie wicked, creeture? Tae Elba w'ye!"

Mary burst into laughter again. George gave her a careless grin, then returned the monkey to his shoulder. It sat and regarded Mary with bright, wise eyes.

"Miss Godwin, I am truly concerned for you, believe else of me what you will."

Mary's laughter died away. She took the candle from his hand. "Please, my lord. My sister and I are perfectly safe in Mr. Shelley's company."

"You will not accept my protection? I will freely give it."

"We do not need it. I thank you."

"Will you not take a loan, then? To see you safe across the Channel? Mr. Shelley may pay me back if he is ever in funds."

Mary shook her head.

A little of the old insolence returned to George's expression. "Well. I have done what I could."

"Good night, Lord Newstead."

"Good night."

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Mary readied herself for bed and climbed atop the soft mattress. She tried to read her Italian grammar, but the sounds coming up the stairway were a distraction. There was loud conversation, and singing, and then Claire's fine voice, unaccompanied, rising clear and sweet up the narrow stair.

Torcere, Mary thought, looking fiercely at her book, *attorcere, rattorcere, scontorcere, torcere.*

Twist. Twist, twist, twist, twist.

Claire finished, and there was loud applause. Bysshe came in shortly afterwards. His eyes sparkled and his color was high. "We were singing," he said.

"I heard."

"I hope we didn't disturb you." He began to undress.

Mary frowned at her book. "You did."

"And I argued some more with Byron." He looked at her and smiled. "Imagine it — if we could convert Byron! Bring one of the most famous men in the world to our views."

She gave him a look. "I can think of nothing more disastrous to our cause than to have him lead it."

"Byron's famous. And he's a splendid man." He looked at her with a self-conscious grin. "I have a pair of byrons, you know, back home. I think I have a good turn of ankle, but the things are the very devil to lace. You really need servants for it."

"He's Newstead now. Not Byron. I wonder if they'll have to change the name of the boot? "

"Why would he change his name, d'you suppose? After he'd become famous with it."

"Wellington became famous as Wellesley."

"Wellington *had* to change his name. His brother was *already* Lord Wellesley." He approached the bed and smiled down at her. "He likes you."

"He likes any woman who crosses his path. Or so I understand."

Bysshe crawled into the bed and put his arm around her, the hand resting warmly on her belly. He smelled of the tobacco he'd been smoking with George. She put her hand atop his, feeling on the third finger the gold wedding ring he still wore. Dissatisfaction crackled through her. "You are free, you know." He spoke softly into her ear. "You can be with Byron if you wish."

Mary gave him an irritated look. "I don't *wish* to be with Byron. I want

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to be with you."

"But you *may*," whispering, the hand stroking her belly, "be with Byron if you want."

Temper flared through Mary. "I don't *want* Byron!" she said. "And I don't want Mr. Thomas Jefferson Hogg, or any of your other friends!"

He seemed a little hurt. "Hogg's a splendid fellow."

"Hogg tried to seduce your wife, and he's tried to seduce me. And I don't understand how he remains your best friend."

"Because we agree on everything, and I hold him no malice where his intent was not malicious." Bysshe gave her a searching look. "I only want you to be free. If we're not free, our love is chained, chained absolutely, and all ruined. I can't live that way — I found that out with Harriet."

She sighed, put her arm around him, drew her fingers through his tangled hair. He rested his head on her shoulder and looked up into her eyes. "I want to be *free* to be with you," Mary told him. "Why will that not suit?"

"It suits." He kissed her cheek. "It suits very well." He looked up at her happily. "And if Harriet joins us in Brussels, with a little money, then all shall be perfect."

Mary gazed at him, utterly unable to understand how he could think his wife would join them, or why, for that matter, he thought it a good idea.

He misses his little boy, she thought. *He wants to be with him.*

The thought rang hollow in her mind.

He kissed her again, his hand moving along her belly, touching her lightly. "My golden-haired Maie." The hand cupped her breast. Her breath hissed inward.

"Careful," she said. "I'm very tender there."

"I will be nothing but tenderness." The kisses reached her lips. "I desire nothing but tenderness for you."

She turned to him, let his lips brush against hers, then press more firmly. Sensation, a little painful, flushed her breast. His tongue touched hers. Desire rose and she put her arms around him.

The door opened and Claire came in, chattering of George while she undressed. Mood broken, tenderness broken, there was nothing to do but sleep.

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"COME AND look," Mary said, "here's a cat eating roses; she'll turn into a woman, when beasts eat these roses they turn into men and women." But there was no one in the cottage, only the sound of the wind.

Fear touched her, cold on the back of her neck.

She stepped into the cottage, and suddenly there was something blocking the sun that came through the windows, an enormous figure, monstrous and black and hungry...

Nausea and the sounds of swordplay woke her. A dog was barking maniacally. Mary rose from the bed swiftly and wrapped her shawl around herself. The room was hot and stuffy, and her gorge rose. She stepped to the window, trying not to vomit, and opened the pane to bring in fresh air.

Coolness touched her cheeks. Below in the courtyard of the inn was Pásmány, the fencing teacher, slashing madly at his pupil, Byron. Newstead. *George*, she reminded herself, she would remember he was *George*.

And serve him right.

She dragged welcome morning air into her lungs as the two battled below her. George was in his shirt, planted firmly on his strong, muscular legs, his pretty face set in an expression of intent calculation. Pásmány flung himself at the man, darting in and out, his sword almost fluid in its movement. They were using straight heavy sabers, dangerous even if unsharpened, and no protective equipment at all. A huge black dog, tied to the vermilion wheel of a big dark-blue barouche, barked at the both of them without cease.

Nausea swam over Mary; she closed her eyes and clutched the window-sill. The ringing of the swords suddenly seemed very far away.

"Are they fighting?" Claire's fingers clutched her shoulder. "Is it a duel? Oh, it's *Byron!*"

Mary abandoned the window and groped her way to the bed. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Bysshe blinked muzzily at her from his pillow.

"I must go down and watch," said Claire. She reached for her clothing and, hopping, managed to dress without missing a second of the action outside. She grabbed a hairbrush on her way out the door and was arranging her hair on the run even before the door slammed behind her.

"Whatever is happening?" Bysshe murmured. She reached blindly for his hand and clutched it.

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"Bysshe," she gasped. "I am with child. I must be."

"I shouldn't think so." Calmly. "We've been using every precaution." He touched her cheek. His hand was cool. "It's the travel and excitement. Perhaps a bad egg."

Nausea blackened her vision and bent her double. Sweat fell in stately rhythm from her forehead to the floor. "This can't be a bad egg," she said. "Not day after day."

"Poor Maie." He nestled behind her, stroked her back and shoulders. "Perhaps there is a flaw in the theory," he said. "Time will tell."

No turning back, Mary thought. She had *wanted* there to be no turning back, to burn every bridge behind her, commit herself totally, as her mother had, to her beliefs. And now she'd succeeded — she and Bysshe were linked forever, linked by the child in her womb. Even if they parted, if — free, as they both wished to be — he abandoned this union, there would still be that link, those bridges burnt, her mother's defiant inheritance fulfilled...

Perhaps there is a flaw in the theory. She wanted to laugh and cry at once.

Bysshe stroked her, his thoughts his own, and outside the martial clangor went on and on.

It was some time before she could dress and go down to the common rooms. The sabre practice had ended, and Bysshe and Claire were already breaking their fast with Somerset, Smith, and Captain Austen. The thought of breakfast made Mary ill, so she wandered outside into the courtyard, where the two breathless swordsmen, towels draped around their necks, were sitting on a bench drinking water, with a tin dipper, from an old wooden bucket. The huge black dog barked, foaming, as she stepped out of the inn, and the two men, seeing her, rose.

"Please sit, gentlemen," she said, waving them back to their bench; she walked across the courtyard to the big open gate and stepped outside. She leaned against the whitewashed stone wall and took deep breaths of the country air. Sweet-smelling wildflowers grew in the verges of the highway. Prosperous-looking villagers nodded pleasantly as they passed about their errands.

"Looking for your haunted house, Miss Godwin?"

George's inevitable voice grated on her ears. She looked at him over her shoulder. "My intention was simply to enjoy the morning."

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"I hope I'm not spoiling it."

Reluctant courtesy rescued him from her own riposting tongue. "How was the Emperor's bed?" she said finally.

He stepped out into the road. "I believe I slept better than he did, and longer." He smiled at her. "No ghosts walked."

"But you still fought a battle after your sleep."

"A far, far better one. Waterloo was not something I would care to experience more than once."

"I shouldn't care to experience it even the first time."

"Well. You're female, of course." All offhand, unaware of her rising hackles. He looked up and down the highway.

"D'ye know, this is the first time I've seen this road in peace. I first rode it north during the retreat from Quatre Bras, a miserable rainy night, and then there was the chase south after Boney the night of Waterloo, then later the advance with the army to Paris..." He shook his head. "It's a pleasant road, ain't it? Much better without the armies."

"Yes."

"We went along there." His hand sketched a line across the opposite horizon. "This road was choked with retreating French, so we went around them. With two squadrons of Vandeleur's lads, the 12th, the Prince of Wales's Own, all I could find once the French gave way. I knew Boney would be running, and I knew it had to be along this road. I had to find him, make certain he would never trouble our peace. Find him for England." He dropped right fist into left palm.

"Boney'd left two battalions of the Guard to hold us, but I went around them. I knew the Prussians would be after him, too, and their mounts were fresher. So we drove on through the night, jumping fences, breaking down hedges, galloping like madmen, and then we found him at Genappe. The bridge was so crammed with refugees that he couldn't get his barouche across."

Mary watched carefully as George, uninvited, told the story that he must, by now, have told a hundred times, and wondered why he was telling it now to someone with such a clear distaste for things military. His color was high, and he was still breathing hard from his exercise; sweat gleamed on his immaculate forehead and matted his shirt; she could see the pulse throbbing in his throat. Perhaps the swordplay and sight of the road had brought the

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memory back; perhaps he was merely, after all, trying to impress her.

A female, of course. Damn the man.

"They'd brought a white Arab up for him to ride away," George went on. "His Chasseurs of the Guard were close around. I told each trooper to mark his enemy as we rode up — we came up at a slow trot, in silence, our weapons sheathed. In the dark the enemy took us for French — our uniforms were similar enough. I gave the signal — we drew pistols and carbines — half the French saddles were emptied in an instant. Some poor lad of a cornet tried to get in my way, and I cut him up through the teeth. Then there he was — the Emperor. With one foot in the stirrup, and Roustam the Mameluke ready to boost him into the saddle."

A tigerish, triumphant smile spread across George's face. His eyes were focused down the road, not seeing her at all. "I put my dripping point in his face, and for the life of me I couldn't think of any French to say except to tell him to sit down. *'Asseyez-vous!'* I ordered, and he gave me a sullen look and sat down, right down in the muddy roadway, with the carbines still cracking around us and bullets flying through the air. And I thought, He's finished. He's done. There's nothing left of him now. We finished off his bodyguard — they hadn't a chance after our first volley. The French soldiers around us thought we were the Prussian advance guard, and they were running as fast as their legs could carry them. Either they didn't know we had their Emperor or they didn't care. So we dragged Boney's barouche off the road, and dragged Boney with it, and ten minutes later the Prussians galloped up — the Death's Head Hussars under Gneisenau, all in black and silver, riding like devils. But the devils had lost the prize."

Looking at the wild glow in George's eyes Mary realized that she'd been wrong — the story was not for her at all, but for *him*. For George. He needed it somehow, this affirmation of himself, the enunciated remembrance of his moment of triumph.

But why? Why did he need it?

She realized his eyes were on her. "Would you like to see the coach, Miss Godwin?" he asked. The question surprised her.

"It's here?"

"I kept it." He laughed. "Why not? It was mine. What Captain Austen would call a fair prize of war." He offered her his arm. She took it, curious about what else she might discover.

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The black mastiff began slavering at her the second she set foot inside the courtyard. Its howls filled the air. "Hush, Picton," George said, and walked straight to the big gold-trimmed blue coach with vermilion wheels. The door had the Byron arms and the Latin motto CREDE BYRON.

Should she believe him? Mary wondered. And if so, how much?

"This is Bonaparte's?" she said.

"Was, Miss Godwin. Till June 16th last. *Down*, Picton!" The dog lunged at him, and he wrestled with it, laughing, until it calmed down and began to fawn on him.

George stepped to the door and opened it. "The Imperial symbols are still on the lining, as you see." The door and couch were lined with rich purple, with golden bees and the letter N worked in heavy gold embroidery. "Fine Italian leatherwork," he said. "Drop-down secretaires so that the great man could write or dictate on the march. Holsters for pistols." He knocked on the coach's polished side. "Bulletproof. There are steel panels built in, just in case any of the Great Man's subjects decided to imitate Marcus Brutus." He smiled. "I was glad for that steel in Paris, I assure you, with Bonapartist assassins lurking under every tree." A mischievous gleam entered his eye. "And last, the best thing of all." He opened a compartment under one of the seats and withdrew a solid silver chamber pot. "You'll notice it still bears the imperial *N*."

"Vanity in silver."

"Possibly. Or perhaps he was afraid one of his soldiers would steal it if he didn't mark it for his own."

Mary looked at the preposterous object and found herself laughing. George looked pleased and stowed the chamber pot in its little cabinet. He looked at her with his head cocked to one side. "You will not reconsider my offer?"

"No." Mary stiffened. "Please don't mention it again."

The mastiff Picton began to howl again, and George seized its collar and told it to behave itself. Mary turned to see Claire walking toward them.

"Won't you be joining us for breakfast, my lord?"

George straightened. "Perhaps a crust or two. I'm not much for breakfast."

Still fasting, Mary thought. "It would make such sense for you to give up meat, you know," she said. "Since you deprive yourself of food anyway."

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"I prefer not to deny myself pleasure, even if the quantities are necessarily restricted."

"Your swordplay was magnificent."

"Thank you. Cavalry style, you know — all slash and dash. But I *am* good, for a' that."

"I know you're busy, but — " Claire bit her lip. "Will you take us to Waterloo?"

"Claire!" cried Mary.

Claire gave a nervous laugh. "Truly," she said. "I'm absolutely with child to see Waterloo."

George looked at her, his eyes intent. "Very well," he said. "We'll be driving through it in any case. And Captain Austen has expressed an interest."

Fury rose in Mary's heart. "Claire, how *dare* you impose — "

"Ha' ye nae pity for the puir lassie?" The Scots voice was mock-severe. "Ye shallnae keep her fra' her Waterloo."

Claire's Waterloo, Mary thought, was exactly what she wanted to keep her from.

George offered them his exaggerated, flourishing bow. "If you'll excuse me, ladies, I must give the necessary orders."

He strode through the door. Pásmány followed, the swords tucked under his arm. Claire gave a little joyous jump, her shoes scraping on cobbles. "I can hardly believe it," she said. "Byron showing us Waterloo!"

"I can't believe it either," Mary said. She sighed wearily and headed for the dining room.

Perhaps she would dare to sip a little milk.

THEY RODE out in Napoleon's six-horse barouche, Claire, Mary, and Bysshe inside with George, and Smith, Somerset, and Captain Austen sharing the outside rear seat. The leather top with its bulletproof steel inserts had been folded away and the inside passengers could all enjoy the open air. The barouche wasn't driven by a coachman up top, but by three postboys who rode the right-hand horses, so there was nothing in front to interrupt the view. Bysshe's mule and little carriage, filled with bags and books, ate dust behind along with the officers' baggage coaches, all driven by George's servants.

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The men talked of war and Claire listened to them with shining eyes. Mary concentrated on enjoying the shape of the low hills with their whitewashed farmhouses and red tile roofs, the cut fields of golden rye stubble, the smell of wildflowers and the sound of birdsong. It was only when the carriage passed a walled farm, its whitewash marred by bullets and cannon shot, that her reverie was marred by the thought of what had happened here.

"La Haie Sainte," George remarked. "The King's German Legion held it throughout the battle, even after they'd run out of ammunition. I sent Mercer's horse guns to keep the French from the walls, else Lord knows what would have happened." He stood in the carriage, looked left and right, frowned. "These roads we're about to pass were sunken — an obstacle to both sides, but mainly to the French. They're filled in now. Mass graves."

"The French were cut down in heaps during their cavalry attack," Somerset added. "The piles were eight feet tall, men and horses."

"How gruesome!" laughed Claire.

"Turn right, Swinson," said George.

Homemade souvenir stands had been set up at the crossroads. Prosperous-looking rustics hawked torn uniforms, breastplates, swords, muskets, bayonets. Somerset scowled at them. "They must have made a fortune looting the dead."

"And the living," said Smith. "Some of our poor wounded weren't brought in till two days after the battle. Many had been stripped naked by the peasants."

A young man ran up alongside the coach, shouting in French. He explained he had been in the battle, a guide to the great Englishman Lord Byron, and would guide them over the field for a few guilders.

"Never heard of you," drawled George, and dismissed him. "Hey! Swinson! Pull up here."

The postboys pulled up their teams. George opened the door of the coach and strolled to one of the souvenir stands. When he returned it was with a French breastplate and helmet. Streaks of rust dribbled down the breastplate, and the helmet's horsehair plume smelled of mildew.

"I thought we could take a few shots at it," George said. "I'd like to see whether armor provides any protection at all against bullets — I suspect not. There's a movement afoot at Whitehall to give breastplates to the Household Brigade, and I suspect they ain't worth the weight. If I can shoot a few holes

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in this with my Mantons, I may be able to prove my point."

They drove down a rutted road of soft earth. It was lined with thorn hedges, but most of them had been broken down during the battle and there were long vistas of rye stubble, the gentle sloping ground, the pattern of plow and harvest. Occasionally the coach wheels grated on something, and Mary remembered they were moving along a mass grave, over the decaying flesh and whitening bones of hundreds of horses and men. A cloud passed across the sun, and she shivered.

"Can ye pull through the hedge, Swinson?" George asked. "I think the ground is firm enough to support us — no rain for a few days at least." The lead postboy studied the hedge with a practiced eye, then guided the lead team through a gap in it.

The barouche rocked over exposed roots and broken limbs, then ground onto a rutted sward of green grass, knee-high, that led gently down into the valley they'd just crossed. George stood again, his eyes scanning the ground. "Pull up over there," he said, pointing, and the coachman complied.

"Here you can see where the battle was won," George said. He tossed his clanging armor out onto the grass, opened the coach door and stepped out himself. The others followed, Mary reluctantly. George pointed with one elegant hand at the ridge running along the opposite end of the valley from their own, a half-mile opposite.

"Napoleon's grand battery," he said. "Eighty guns, many of them twelve-pounders — Boney called them his daughters. He was an artillerist, you know, and he always prepared his attacks with a massed bombardment. The guns fired for an hour and put our poor fellows through hell. Bylandt's Dutchmen were standing in the open, right where we are now, and the guns broke 'em entirely.

"Then the main attack came, about two o'clock. Count d'Erlon's corps, 16,000 strong, arrayed 25 men deep with heavy cavalry on the wings. They captured La Haye and Papelotte, those farms over there on the left, and rolled up this ridge with drums beating the *pas de charge...*"

George turned. There was a smile on his face. Mary watched him closely — the pulse was beating like d'Erlon's drums in his throat, and his color was high. He was loving every second of this.

He went on, describing the action, and against her will Mary found herself seeing it, Picton's division lying in wait, prone on the reverse slope,

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George bringing the heavy cavalry up, the cannons banging away. Picton's men rising, firing their volleys, following with the bayonet. The Highlanders screaming in Gaelic, their plumes nodding as they drew their long broadswords and plunged into the fight, the pipers playing "Johnnie Cope" amid all the screams and clatter. George leading the Household and Union Brigades against the enemy cavalry, the huge grain-fed English hunters driving back the chargers from Normandy. And then George falling on d'Erlon's flanks, driving the French in a frightened mob all the way back across the valley while the British horsemen slashed at their backs. The French gunners of the grand battery unable to fire for fear of hitting their own men, and then dying themselves under the British sabres.

Mary could sense as well the things George left out. The sound of steel grating on bone. Wails and moans of the wounded, the horrid challenging roars of the horses. And in the end, a valley filled with stillness, a carpet of bodies and pierced flesh...

George gave a long sigh. "Our cavalry are brave, you know, far too brave for their own good. And the officers get their early training in steeplechases and the hunt, and their instinct is to ride straight at the objective at full gallop, which is absolutely the worst thing cavalry can ever do. After Slade led his command to disaster back in the Year Twelve, the Duke realized he could only commit cavalry at his peril. In Spain we finally trained the horse to maneuver and to make careful charges, but the Union and Household troops hadn't been in the Peninsula, and didn't know the drill.... I drove myself mad in the weeks before the battle, trying to beat the recall orders into them." He laughed self-consciously. "My heart was in my mouth during the whole charge, I confess, less with fear of the enemy than with terror my own men would run mad. But they answered the trumpets, all but the Inniskillings, who wouldnae listen — the Irish blood was up — and while they ran off into the valley, the rest of us stayed in the grand battery. Sabred the gunners, drove off the limbers with the ready ammunition — and where we could we took the wheels off the guns, and rolled 'em back to our lines like boys with hoops. And the Inniskillings — " He shook his head. "They ran wild into the enemy lines, and Boney loosed his lancers at 'em, and they died almost to a man. I had to watch from the middle of the battery, with my officers begging to be let slip again and rescue their comrades, and I had to forbid it."

There were absolute tears in George's eyes. Mary watched in fascination

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and wondered if this was a part of the performance, or whether he was genuinely affected — but then she saw that Bysshe's eyes had misted over and Somerset was wiping his eyes with his one good sleeve. So, she thought, she *could* believe Byron, at least a little.

"Well." George cleared his throat, trying to control himself. "Well. We came back across the valley herding thousands of prisoners — and that charge proved the winning stroke. Boney attacked later, of course — all his heavy cavalry came knee-to-knee up the middle, between La Haie Sainte and Hougoumont," gesturing to the left with one arm, "we had great guns and squares of infantry to hold them, and my heavies to counterattack. The Prussians were pressing the French at Plancenoit and Papelotte. Boney's last throw of the dice sent the Old Guard across the valley after sunset, but our Guards under Maitland held them, and Colborne's 52nd and the Belgian Chasseurs got round their flanks, and after they broke I let the Household and Union troopers have their head — we swept 'em away. Sabred and trampled Boney's finest troops right in front of his eyes, all in revenge for the brave, mad Inniskillings — the only time his Guard ever failed in attack, and it marked the end of his reign. We were blown by the end of it, but Boney had nothing left to counterattack with. I knew he would flee. So I had a fresh horse brought up and went after him."

"So you won the battle of Waterloo!" said Claire.

George gave her a modest look that, to Mary, seemed false as the very devil. "I was privileged to have a decisive part. But 'twas the Duke that won the battle. We all fought at his direction."

"But you captured Napoleon and ended the Empire!"

He smiled. "That I did do, lassie, ay."

"Bravo!" Claire clapped her hands.

Harry Smith glanced up with bright eyes. "D'ye know, George," he said, "pleased as I am to hear this modest recitation of your accomplishments, I find precious little mention in your discourse of the *infantry*. I seem to remember fighting a few Frenchies myself, down Hougoumont way, with Reille's whole corps marching down on us, and I believe I can recollect in my dim footsoldier's mind that I stood all day under cannonshot and bursting mortar bombs, and that Kellerman's heavy cavalry came wave after wave all afternoon, with the Old Guard afterward as a lagniappe..."

"I am pleased that you had some little part," George said, and bowed

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from his slim cavalry waist.

"Your lordship's condescension does you more credit than I can possibly express." Returning the bow.

George reached out and gave Smith's ear an affectionate tweak. "May I continue my tale? And then we may travel to Captain Harry's part of the battlefield, and he will remind us of whatever small role it was the footsoldiers played."

George went through the story of Napoleon's capture again. It was the same, sentiment for sentiment, almost word for word. Mary wandered away, the fat moist grass turning the hem of her skirt green. Skylarks danced through the air, trilling as they went. She wandered by the old broken thorn hedge and saw wild roses blossoming in it, and she remembered the wild roses planted on her mother's grave.

She thought of George Gordon Noël with tears in his eyes, and the way the others had wanted to weep — even Bysshe, who hadn't been there — and all for the loss of some Irishmen who, had they been crippled or out of uniform or begging for food or employment, these fine English officers would probably have turned into the street to starve...

She looked up at the sound of footsteps. Harry Smith walked up and nodded pleasantly. "I believe I have heard George give this speech," he said.

"So have I. Does he give it often?"

"Oh yes." His voice dropped, imitated George's limpid dramatics. *"He's finished. He's done. There's nothing left of him now."* Mary covered amusement with her hand. "Though the tale has improved somewhat since the first time," Smith added. "In this poor infantryman's opinion."

Mary gave him a careful look. "Is he all he seems to think he is?"

Smith gave a thin smile. "Oh, ay. The greatest cavalryman of our time, to be sure. Without doubt a genius. *Chevalier sans peur et* — well, I won't say *sans reproche.* Not quite." His brow contracted as he gave careful thought to his next words. "He purchased his way up to colonel — that would be with Lady Newstead's money — but since then he's earned his spurs."

"He truly is talented, then."

"Truly. But of course he's lucky, too. If Le Marchant hadn't died at Salamanca, George wouldn't have been able to get his heavy brigade, and if poor General Cotton hadn't been shot by our own sentry George wouldn't have got all the cavalry in time for Vitoria, and of course if Uxbridge hadn't

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run off with Wellington's sister-in-law then George might not have got command at Waterloo.... Young and without political influence as he is, he wouldn't have *kept* all those commands for long if he hadn't spent his every leave getting soused with that unspeakable hound the Prince of Wales. Ay, there's been luck involved. But who won't wish for luck in his life, eh?"

"What if his runs out?"

Smith gave this notion the same careful consideration. "I don't know," he said finally. "He's fortune's laddie, but that don't mean he's without character."

"You surprise me, speaking of him so frankly."

"We've been friends since Spain. And nothing I say will matter in any case." He smiled. "Besides, hardly anyone ever asks for *my* opinion."

The sound of Claire's laughter and applause carried across the sward. Smith cocked an eye at the other party. "Boney's at sword's point, if I'm not mistaken."

"Your turn for glory."

"Ay. If anyone will listen after George's already won the battle." He held out his arm and Mary took it. "You should meet my wife. Juanita — I met her in Spain at the storming of Badajoz. The troops were carrying away the loot, but I carried her away instead." He looked at her thoughtfully. "You have a certain spirit in common."

Mary felt flattered. "Thank you, Captain Smith. I'm honored by the comparison."

THEY MOVED to another part of the battlefield. There was a picnic overlooking the château of Hougoumont that lay red-roofed in its valley next to a well-tended orchard. Part of the chateau had been destroyed in the battle, Smith reported, but it had been rebuilt since.

Rebuilt, Mary thought, by owners enriched by battlefield loot.

George called for his pistols and moved the cuirass a distance away, propping it up on a small slope with the helmet sitting on top. A servant brought the Mantons and loaded them, and while the others stood and watched, George aimed and fired. Claire clapped her hands and laughed, though there was no discernible effect. White gunsmoke drifted on the morning breeze. George presented his second pistol, paused to aim, fired

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again. There was a whining sound and a scar appeared on the shoulder of the cuirass. The other men laughed.

"That cuirassier's got you for sure!" Harry Smith said.

"May I venture a shot?" Bysshe asked. George assented.

One of George's servants reloaded the pistols while George gave Bysshe instruction in shooting. "Hold the arm out straight and use the bead to aim."

"I like keeping the elbow bent a little," Bysshe said. "Not tucked in like a duellist, but not locked, either."

Bysshe took effortless aim — Mary's heart leaped at the grace of his movement — then Bysshe paused an instant and fired. There was a thunking sound and a hole appeared in the French breastplate, directly over the heart.

"Luck!" George said.

"Yes!" Claire said. "Purest luck!"

"Not so," Bysshe said easily. "Observe the plume holder." He presented the other pistol, took briefest aim, fired. With a little whine the helmet's metal plume holder took flight and whipped spinning through the air. Claire applauded and gave a cheer.

Mary smelled powder on the gentle morning wind.

Bysshe returned the pistols to George. "Fine weapons," he said, "though I prefer an octagonal barrel, as you can sight along the top."

George smiled thinly and said nothing.

"Mr. Shelley," said Somerset, "you have the makings of a soldier."

"I've always enjoyed a good shoot," Bysshe said, "though of course I won't fire at an animal. And as for soldiering, who knows what I might have been were I not exposed to Mr. Godwin's political thought?"

There was silence at this. Bysshe smiled at George. "You shouldn't lock the elbow out," he said. "That fashion, every little motion of the body transmits itself to the weapon. If you keep the elbow bent a bit, it forms a sort of a spring to absorb involuntary muscle tremors and you'll have better control." He looked at the others gaily. "It's not for nothing I was an engineer!"

George handed the pistols to his servant for loading. "We'll fire another volley," he said. His voice was curt.

Mary watched George as the Mantons were loaded, as he presented each pistol — straight-armed — and fired again. One knocked the helmet off its perch, the other struck the breastplate at an angle and bounced off. The others

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laughed, and Mary could see a little muscle twitching in George's cheek.

"My turn, George," said Harry Smith, and the pistols were recharged. His first shot threw up turf, but the second punched a hole in the cuirass. "There," Smith said, "that should satisfy the Horse Guards that armor ain't worth the weight."

Somerset took his turn, firing awkwardly with his one hand, and missed both shots.

"Another volley," George said.

There was something unpleasant in his tone, and the others took hushed notice. The pistols were reloaded. George presented the first pistol at the target, and Mary could see how he was vibrating with passion, so taut his knuckles were white on the pistol-grip. His shots missed clean.

"Bad luck, George," Somerset said. His voice was calming. "Probably the bullets were deformed and didn't fly right."

"Another volley," said George.

"We have an appointment in Brussels, George."

"It can wait."

The others drew aside and clustered together while George insisted on firing several more times. "What a troublesome fellow he is," Smith muttered. Eventually George put some holes in the cuirass, collected it, and stalked to the coach, where he had the servants strap it to the rear so that he could have it sent to the Prince of Wales.

Mary sat as far away from George as possible. George's air of defiant petulance hung over the company as they started north on the Brussels road. But then Bysshe asked Claire to sing, and Claire's high, sweet voice rose above the green countryside of Brabant, and by the end of the song everyone was smiling. Mary flashed Bysshe a look of gratitude.

The talk turned to war again, battles and sieges and the dead, a long line of uniformed shadows, young, brave men who fell to the French, to accident, to camp fever. Mary had little to say on the subject that she hadn't already offered, but she listened carefully, felt the soldiers' sadness at the death of comrades, the rejoicing at victory, the satisfaction of a deadly, intricate job done well. The feelings expressed seemed fine, passionate, even a little exalted. Bysshe listened and spoke little, but gradually Mary began to feel that he was somehow included in this circle of men and that she was not — perhaps his expert pistol shooting had made him a part of this company.

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A female, of course. War was a fraternity only, though the suffering it caused made no distinction as to sex.

"May I offer an observation?" Mary said.

"Of course," said Captain Austen.

"I am struck by the passion you show when speaking of your comrades and your — shall I call it your craft?"

"Please, Miss Godwin," George said. "The enlisted men may have a *craft*, if you like. We are gentlemen, and have a *profession.*"

"I intended no offense. But still — I couldn't help but observe the fine feelings you show towards your comrades, and the attention you give to the details of your...profession."

George seemed pleased. "Ay. Didn't I speak last night of war being full of its own kind of greatness?"

"Greatness perhaps the greater," Bysshe said, "by existing in contrast to war's wretchedness."

"Precisely," said George.

"Ay," Mary said, "but what struck me most was that you gentlemen showed such elevated passion when discussing war, such sensibility, high feeling, and utter conviction — more than I am accustomed to seeing from any...respectable males." Harry Smith gave an uncomfortable laugh at this characterization.

"Perhaps you gentlemen practice war," Mary went on, "because it allows free play to your passions. You are free to feel, to exist at the highest pitch of emotion. Society does not normally permit this to its members — perhaps it *must* in order to make war attractive."

Bysshe listened to her in admiration. "Brava!" he cried. "War as the sole refuge of the passions — I think you have struck the thing exactly."

Smith and Somerset frowned, working through the notion. It was impossible to read Austen's weathered countenance. But George shook his head wearily.

"Mere stuff, I'm afraid," he said. "Your analysis shows an admirable ingenuity, Miss Godwin, but I'm afraid there's no more place for passion on the battlefield than anywhere else. The poor Inniskillings had passion, but look what became of *them.*" He paused, shook his head again. "No, it's drill and cold logic and a good eye for ground that wins the battles. In my line it's not only my own sensibility that must be mastered, but those of hundreds of

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men and horses."

"Drill is meant to master the passions," said Captain Austen. "For in a battle, the impulse, the overwhelming passion, is to run away. This impulse must be subdued."

Mary was incredulous. "You claim not to experience these elevated passions which you display so plainly?"

George gave her the insolent, under-eyed look again. "All passions have their place, Miss Godwin. I reserve mine for the appropriate time."

Resentment snarled up Mary's spine. "Weren't those tears I saw standing in your eyes when you described the death of the Inniskillings? Do you claim that's part of your drill?"

George's color brightened. "I didn't shed those tears during the battle. At the time I was too busy damning those cursed Irishmen for the wild fools they were, and wishing I'd flogged more of them when I'd the chance."

"But wasn't Bonaparte's great success on account of his ability to inspire his soldiers and his nation?" Bysshe asked. "To raise their passions to a great pitch and conquer the world?"

"And it was the uninspired, roguey English with their drill and discipline who put him back in his place," George said. "Bonaparte should have saved the speeches and put his faith in the drill-square."

Somerset gave an amused laugh. "This conversation begins to sound like one of Mrs. West's novels of Sense and Sensibility that were so popular in the Nineties," he said. "I suppose you're too young to recall them. *A Gossip's Story*, and *The Advantages of Education.* My governess made me read them both."

Harry Smith looked at Captain Austen with glittering eyes. "In *fact* — " he began.

Captain Austen interrupted. "One is not blind to the world of feeling," he said, "but surely Reason must rule the passions, else even a good heart can be led astray."

"I can't agree," Bysshe said. "Surely it is Reason that has led us to the world of law, and property, and equity, and kingship — and all the hypocrisy that comes with upholding these artificial formations, and denying our true nature, all that deprives us of life, of true and natural goodness."

"Absolutely!" said Claire.

"It is Reason," Mary said, "which makes you deny the evidence of my

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senses. I *saw* your emotion, gentlemen, when you discussed your dead comrades. And I applaud it."

"It does you credit," Bysshe added.

"Do you claim not to feel anything in battle?" Mary demanded. "Nothing at all?"

George paused a moment, then answered seriously. "My concentration is very great. It is an elevated sort of apprehension, very intent. I must be aware of so much, you see — I can't afford to miss a thing. My analytical faculty is always in play."

"And that's all?" cried Mary.

That condescending half-smile returned. "There isnae time for else, lass."

"At the height of a charge? In the midst of an engagement?"

"Then especially. An instant's break in my concentration and all could be lost."

"Lord Newstead," Mary said, "I cannot credit this."

George only maintained his slight smile, knowing and superior. Mary wanted to wipe it from his face, and considered reminding him of his fractious conduct over the pistols. *How's that for control and discipline,* she thought.

But no, she decided, it would be a long, unpleasant ride to Brussels if she upset George again.

Against her inclinations, she concluded to be English, and hypocritical, and say nothing.

BYSSHE FOUND neither wife nor money in Brussels, and George arranged lodgings for them that they couldn't afford. The only option Mary could think of was to make their way to a channel port, then somehow try to talk their way to England with promise of payment once Bysshe had access to funds in London.

It was something for which she held little hope.

They couldn't afford any local diversions, and so spent their days in a graveyard, companionably reading.

And then, one morning two days after their arrival in Brussels, as Mary lay ill in their bed, Bysshe returned from an errand with money, coins

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clanking in a bag. "We're saved!" he said, and emptied the bag into her lap.

Mary looked at the silver lying on the comforter and felt her anxiety ease. They were old Spanish coins with the head of George III stamped over their original design, but they were real for all that. "A draft from Har...from your wife?" she said.

"No." Bysshe sat on the bed, frowned. "It's a loan from Byron — Lord Newstead, I mean."

"Bysshe!" Mary sat up and set bedclothes and silver flying. "You took money from that man? Why?"

He put a paternal hand on hers. "Lord Newstead convinced me it would be in your interest, and Claire's. To see you safely to England."

"We'll do well enough without his money! It's not even his to give away, it's his wife's."

Bysshe seemed hurt. "It's a loan," he said. "I'll pay it back once I'm in London." He gave a little laugh. "I'm certain he doesn't expect repayment. He thinks we're vagabonds."

"He thinks worse of us than that." A wave of nausea took her and she doubled up with a little cry. She rolled away from him. Coins rang on the floor. Bysshe put a hand on her shoulder, stroked her back.

"Poor Pecksie," he said. "Some English cooking will do you good."

"Why don't you believe me?" Tears welled in her eyes. "I'm with child, Bysshe!"

He stroked her. "Perhaps. In a week or two we'll know for certain." His tone lightened. "He invited us to a ball tonight."

"Who?"

"Newstead. The ball's in his honor, he can invite whomever he pleases. The Prince of Orange will be there, and the English ambassador."

Mary had no inclination to be the subject of one of George's freaks. "We have no clothes fit for a ball," she said, "and I don't wish to go in any case."

"We have money now. We can buy clothes." He smiled. "And Lord Newstead said he would loan you and Claire some jewels."

"Lady Newstead's jewels," Mary reminded.

"All those powerful people! Imagine it! Perhaps we can affect a conversion."

Mary glared at him over her shoulder. "That money is for our passage to England. George wants only to display us, his tame Radicals, like his tame

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monkey or his tame panther. We're just a caprice of his — he doesn't take either us or our arguments seriously."

"That doesn't invalidate our arguments. We can still make them." Cheerfully. "Claire and I will go, then. She's quite set on it, and I hate to disappoint her."

"I think it will do us no good to be in his company for an instant longer. I think he is..." She reached behind her back, took his hand, touched it. "Perhaps he is a little mad," she said.

"Byron? Really? He's *wrong*, of course, but..."

Nausea twisted her insides. Mary spoke rapidly, desperate to convince Bysshe of her opinions. "He so craves glory and fame, Bysshe. The war gave expression to his passions, gave him the achievement he desired — but now the war's over and he can't have the worship he needs. That's why he's taken up with us — he wants even *our* admiration. There's no future for him now — he could follow Wellington into politics but he'd be in Wellington's shadow forever that way. He's got nowhere to go."

There was a moment's silence. "I see you've been giving him much thought," Bysshe said finally.

"His marriage is a failure — he can't go back to England. His relations with women will be irregular, and — "

"*Our* relations are irregular, Maie. And it's the better for it."

"I didn't mean that. I meant he cannot love. It's worship he wants, not love. And those pretty young men he travels with — there's something peculiar in that. Something unhealthy."

"Captain Austen is neither pretty nor young."

"He's along only by accident. Another of George's freaks."

"And if you think he's a paederast, well — we should be tolerant. Plato believed it a virtue. And George always asks after *you*."

"I do not wish to be in his thoughts."

"He is in yours." His voice was gentle. "And that is all right. You are free."

Mary's heart sank. "It is *your* child I have, Bysshe," she said.

Bysshe didn't answer. *Torcere*, she thought. *Attorcere, rattorcere.*

Claire's face glowed as she modelled her new ball gown, circling on the parlor carpet of the lodgings George had acquired for Bysshe's party. Lady

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Newstead's jewels glittered from Claire's fingers and throat. Bysshe, in a new coat, boots, and pantaloons, smiled approvingly from the corner.

"Very lovely, Miss Clairmont," George approved.

George was in full uniform, scarlet coat, blue facings, gold braid, and byrons laced tight. His cocked hat was laid carelessly on the mantel. George's eyes turned to Mary.

"I'm sorry you are ill, Miss Godwin," he said. "I wish you were able to accompany us."

Bysshe, Mary presumed, had told him this. Mary found no reason why she should support the lie.

"I'm not ill," she said mildly. "I simply do not wish to go — I have some pages I wish to finish. A story called *Hate.*"

George and Bysshe flushed alike. Mary, smiling, approached Claire, took her hand, admired gown and gems. She was surprised by the affect: the jewels, designed for an older woman, gave Claire a surprisingly mature look, older and more experienced than her sixteen years. Mary found herself growing uneasy.

"The seamstress was shocked when she was told I needed it tonight," Claire said. "She had to call in extra help to finish in time." She laughed. "But money mended everything!"

"For which we may thank Lord Newstead," Mary said, "and Lady Newstead to thank for the jewels." She looked up at George, who was still smouldering from her earlier shot. "I'm surprised, my lord, that she allows them to travel without her."

"Annabella has her own jewels," George said. "These are mine. I travel often without her, and as I move in the highest circles, I want to make certain that any lady who finds herself in my company can glitter with the best of them."

"How chivalrous." George cocked his head, trying to decide whether or not this was irony. Mary decided to let him wonder. She folded her hands and smiled sweetly.

"I believe it's time to leave," she said. "You don't want to keep his highness of Orange waiting."

Cloaks and hats were snatched; goodbyes were said. Mary managed to whisper to Claire as she helped with her cloak.

"Be careful, Jane," she said.

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Resentment glittered in Claire's black eyes. "*You* have a man," she said.

Mary looked at her. "So does Lady Newstead."

Claire glared hatred and swept out, fastening bonnet-strings. Bysshe kissed Mary's lips, George her hand. Mary prepared to settle by the fire with pen and manuscript, but before she could sit, there was a knock on the door and George rushed in.

"Forgot me hat," he said. But instead of taking it from the mantel, he walked to where Mary stood by her chair and simply looked at her. Mary's heart lurched at the intensity of his gaze.

"Your hat awaits you, my lord," she said.

"I hope you will reconsider," said George.

Mary merely looked at him, forced him to state his business. He took her hand in both of his, and she clenched her fist as his fingers touched hers.

"I ask you, Miss Godwin, to reconsider my offer to take you under my protection," George said.

Mary clenched her teeth. Her heart hammered. "I am perfectly safe with Mr. Shelley," she said.

"Perhaps not as safe as you think." She glared at him. George's eyes bored into hers. "I gave him money," he said, "and he told me you were free. Is that the act of a protector?"

Rage flamed through Mary. She snatched her hand back and came within an inch of slapping George's face.

"Do you think he's sold me to you?" she cried.

"I can conceive no other explanation," George said.

"You are mistaken and a fool." She turned away, trembling in anger, and leaned against the wall.

"I understand this may be a shock. To have trusted such a man, and then discovered — "

The wallpaper had little bees on it, Napoleon's emblem. "Can't you understand that Bysshe was perfectly literal!" she shouted. "I am free, he is free, Claire is free — free to go, or free to stay." She straightened her back, clenched her fists. "I will stay. Goodbye, Lord Newstead."

"I fear for you."

"Go away," she said, speaking to the wallpaper; and after a moment's silence she heard George turn, and take his hat from the mantel, and leave the building.

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Mary collapsed into her chair. The only thing she could think was, *Poor Claire.*

Two

MARY WAS pregnant again. She folded her hands over her belly, stood on the end of the dock, and gazed up at the Alps.

Clouds sat low on the mountains, growling. The passes were closed with avalanche and unseasonal snow, the *vaudaire* storm wind tore white from the steep waves of the gray lake, and *Ariel* pitched madly at its buoy by the waterfront, its mast-tip tracing wild figures against the sky.

The *vaudaire* had caused a "seiche" — the whole mass of the lake had shifted toward Montreux, and water levels had gone up six feet. The strange freshwater tide had cast up a line of dead fish and dead birds along the stony waterfront, all staring at Mary with brittle glass eyes.

"It doesn't look as if we'll be leaving tomorrow," Bysshe said. He and Mary stood by the waterfront, cloaked and sheltered by an umbrella. Water broke on the shore, leaped through the air, reaching for her, for Bysshe.... It spattered at her feet.

She thought of Harriet, Bysshe's wife, hair drifting, clothes floating like seaweed. Staring eyes like dark glass. Her hands reaching for her husband from the water.

She had been missing for weeks before her drowned body was finally found.

The *vaudaire* was supposed to be a warm wind from Italy, but its warmth was lost on Mary. It felt like the burning touch of a glacier.

"Let's go back to the hotel," Mary said. "I'm feeling a little weak."

She would deliver around the New Year unless the baby was again premature.

A distant boom reached her, was echoed, again and again, by mountains. Another avalanche. She hoped it hadn't fallen on any of the brave Swiss who were trying to clear the roads.

She and Bysshe returned to the hotel through darkening streets. It was a fine place, rather expensive, though they could afford it now. Their circumstances had improved in the last year, though at cost.

Old Sir Bysshe had died, and left Bysshe a thousand pounds per year.

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Harriet Shelley had drowned, bricks in her pockets. Mary had given birth to a premature daughter who had lived only two weeks. She wondered about the child she carried—she had an intuition all was not well. Death, perhaps, was stalking her baby, was stalking them all.

In payment for what? Mary wondered. What sin had they committed?

She walked through Montreux's wet streets and thought of dead glass eyes, and grasping hands, and hair streaming like seaweed. Her daughter dying alone in her cradle at night, convulsing, twitching, eyes open and tiny red face torn with mortal terror.

When Mary had come to the cradle later to nurse the baby, she had thought it in an unusually deep sleep. She hadn't realized that death had come until after dawn, when the little corpse turned cold.

Death. She and Bysshe had kissed and coupled on her mother's grave, had shivered together at the gothic delights of *Vathek*, had whispered ghost stories to one another in the dead of night till Claire screamed with hysteria. Somehow death had not really touched her before. She and Bysshe had crossed war-scarred France two years ago, sleeping in homes abandoned for fear of Cossacks, and somehow death had not intruded into their lives.

"Winter is coming," Bysshe said. "Do we wish to spend it in Geneva? I'd rather push on to Italy and be a happy salamander in the sun."

"I've had another letter from Mrs. Godwin."

Bysshe sighed. "England, then."

She sought his hand and squeezed it. Bysshe wanted the sun of Italy, but Bysshe was her sun, the blaze that kept her warm, kept her from despair. Death had not touched *him*. He flamed with life, with joy, with optimism.

She tried to stay in his radiance. Where his light banished the creeping shadows that followed her.

As they entered their hotel room they heard the wailing of an infant and found Claire trying to comfort her daughter Alba. "Where have you been?" Claire demanded. There were tears on her cheeks. "I fell asleep and dreamed you'd abandoned me! And then I cried out and woke the baby."

Bysshe moved to comfort her. Mary settled herself heavily onto a sofa.

In the small room in Montreux, with dark shadows creeping in the corners and the *vaudaire* driving against the shutters, Mary put her arms around her unborn child and willed the shade of death to keep away.

• • •

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Bysshe stopped short in the midst of his afternoon promenade. "Great heavens," he said. His tone implied only mild surprise—he was so filled with life and certitude that he took most of life's shocks purely in stride.

When Mary looked up, she gasped and her heart gave a crash.

It was a barouche—*the* barouche. Vermilion wheels, liveried postboys wearing muddy slickers, armorial bearings on the door, the bulletproof top raised to keep out the storm. Baggage piled on platforms fore and aft.

Rolling past as Mary and Bysshe stood on the tidy Swiss sidewalk and stared.

CREDE BYRON, Mary thought viciously. As soon credit Lucifer.

The gray sky lowered as they watched the barouche grind past, steel-rimmed wheels thundering on the cobbles. And then a window dropped on its leather strap, and someone shouted something to the postboys. The words were lost in the *vaudaire*, but the postboys pulled the horses to a stop. The door opened and George appeared, jamming a round hat down over his auburn hair. His jacket was a little tight, and he appeared to have gained a stone or more since Mary had last seen him. He walked toward Bysshe and Mary, and Mary tried not to stiffen with fury at the sight of him.

"Mr. Omnibus! Tí kánete?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Miss Godwin." George bowed, clasped Mary's hand. She closed her fist, reminded herself that she hated him.

"I'm Mrs. Shelley now."

"My felicitations," George said.

George turned to Bysshe. "Are the roads clear to the west?" he asked. "I and my companion must push on to Geneva on a matter of urgency."

"The roads have been closed for three days," Bysshe said. "There have been both rockslides and avalanches near Chexbres."

"That's what they told me in Vevey. There was no lodging there, so I came here, even though it's out of our way." George pressed his lips together, a pale line. He looked over his shoulder at the coach, at the mountainside, at the dangerous weather. "We'll have to try to force our way through tomorrow," he said. "Though it will be damned hard."

"It shouldn't," Bysshe said. "Not in a heavy coach like that."

George looked grim. "It was unaccountably dangerous just getting here," he said.

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"Stay till the weather is better," Bysshe said, smiling. "You can't be blamed if the weather holds you up."

Mary hated Bysshe for that smile, even though she knew he had reasons to be obliging.

Just as she had reasons for hating.

"Nay." George shook his head, and a little Scots fell out. "I cannae bide."

"You might make it on a mule."

"I have a lady with me." Shortly. "Mules are out of the question."

"A boat...?"

"Perhaps if the lady is superfluous," Mary interrupted, "you could leave her behind, and carry out your errand on a mule, alone."

The picture was certainly an enjoyable one.

George looked at her, visibly mastered his unspoken reply, then shook his head.

"She must come."

"Lord Newstead," Mary went on, "would you like to see your daughter? She is not superfluous either, and she is here."

George glanced nervously at the coach, then back. "Is Claire here as well?"

"Yes."

George looked grim. "This is not...a good time."

Bysshe summoned an unaccustomed gravity. "I think, my lord," Bysshe said, "there may never be a better time. You have not been within five hundred miles of your daughter since her birth. You are on an urgent errand and may not tarry — very well. But you must spend a night here, and can't press on till morning. There will never be a better moment."

George looked at him stony-eyed, then nodded. "What hotel?"

"La Royale."

He smiled. "Royal, eh? A pretty sentiment for the Genevan Republic."

"We're in Vaud, not Geneva."

"Still not over the border?" George gave another nervous glance over his shoulder. "I need to set a faster pace."

His long hair streamed in the wind as he stalked back to the coach. Mary could barely see a blonde head gazing cautiously from the window. She half-expected that the coach would drive on and she would never see George again, but instead the postboys turned the horses from the waterfront road into the

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town, toward the hotel.

Bysshe smiled purposefully and began to stride to the hotel. Mary followed, walking fast across the wet cobbles to keep up with him. "I can't but think that good will come of this," he said.

"I pray you're right."

Much pain, Mary thought, *however it turned out.*

George's new female was tall and blonde and pink-faced, though she walked hunched over as if embarrassed by her height, and took small, shy steps. She was perhaps in her middle twenties.

They met, embarrassingly, on the hotel's wide stair, Mary with Claire, Alba in Claire's arms. The tall blonde, lower lip outthrust haughtily, walked past them on the way to her room, her gaze passing blankly over them. Perhaps she hadn't been told who Alba's father was.

She had a maid with her and a pair of George's men, both of whom had pistols stuffed in their belts. For a wild moment Mary wondered George had abducted her.

No, she decided, this was only George's theatricality. He didn't have his menagerie with him this time, no leopards or monkeys, so he dressed his postboys as bandits.

The woman passed. Mary felt Claire stiffen. "She looks like *you,*" Claire hissed.

Mary looked at the woman in astonishment. "She doesn't. Not at all."

"She does! Tall, blonde, fair eyes..." Claire's own eyes filled with tears. "Why can't she be dark, like me?"

"Don't be absurd!" Mary seized her sister's hand, pulled her down the stairs. "Save the tears for later. They may be needed."

In the lobby Mary saw more of George's men carrying in luggage. Pásmány, the fencing master, had slung a carbine over one shoulder. Mary's mind whirled — perhaps this was an abduction after all.

Or perhaps the blonde's family — or husband — was in pursuit.

"This way." Bysshe's voice. He led them into one of the hotel's candlelit drawing rooms, closed the crystal-knobbed door behind them. A huge porcelain stove loomed over them.

George stood uncertain in the candlelight, elegant clothing over muddy boots. He looked at Claire and Alba stonily, then advanced, peered at the tiny

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form that Claire offered him.

"Your daughter Alba," Bysshe said, hovering at his shoulder.

George watched the child for a long, doubtful moment, his auburn hair hanging down his forehead. Then he straightened. "My offer rests, Miss Clairmont, on its previous terms."

Claire drew back, rested Alba on her shoulder. "Never," she said. She licked her lips. "It is too monstrous."

"Come, my lord," Bysshe said. He ventured to put a hand on George's shoulder. "Surely your demands are unreasonable."

"I offered to provide the child with means," George said, "to see that she is raised in a fine home, free from want, and among good people — friends of mine, who will offer her every advantage. I would take her myself but," hesitating, "my domestic conditions would not permit it."

Mary's heart flamed. "But at the cost of forbidding her the sight of her mother!" she said. "That is too cruel."

"The child's future will already be impaired by her irregular connections," George said. "Prolonging those connections could only do her further harm." His eyes flicked up to Claire. "Her mother can only lower her station, not raise it. She is best off with a proper family who can raise her with their own."

Claire's eyes flooded with tears. She turned away, clutching Alba to her. "I won't give her up!" she said. The child began to cry.

George folded his arms. "That settles matters. If you won't accept my offer, then there's an end." The baby's wails filled the air.

"Alba cries for her father," Bysshe said. "Can you not let her into your heart?"

A half-smile twitched across George's lips. "I have no absolute certainty that I *am* this child's father."

A keening sound came from Claire. For a wild, raging moment Mary looked for a weapon to plunge into George's breast. "Unnatural man!" she cried. "Can't you acknowledge the consequences of your own behavior?"

"On the contrary, I am willing to ignore the questionable situation in which I found Miss Clairmont and to care for the child completely. But only on my terms."

"I don't trust his promises!" Claire said. "He abandoned me in Munich without a penny!"

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"We agreed to part," George said.

"If it hadn't been for Captain Austen's kindness, I would have starved." She leaned on the door jamb for support, and Mary joined her and buoyed her with an arm around her waist.

"You ran out into the night," George said. "You wouldn't take money."

"I'll tell her!" Claire drew away from Mary, dragged at the door, hauled it open. "I'll tell your new woman!"

Fear leaped into George's eyes. "Claire!" He rushed to the door, seized her arm as she tried to pass; Claire wrenched herself free and staggered into the hotel lobby. Alba wailed in her arms. George's servants were long gone, but hotel guests stared as if in tableaux, hats and walking-sticks half-raised. Fully aware of the spectacle they were making, Mary, clumsy in pregnancy, inserted herself between George and Claire. Claire broke for the stair, while George danced around Mary like an awkward footballer. Mary rejoiced in the fact that her pregnancy seemed only to make her more difficult to get around.

Bysshe put an end to it. He seized George's wrist in a firm grip. "You can't stop us all, my lord," he said.

George glared at him, his look all fury and ice. "What d'ye want, then?"

Claire, panting and flushed, paused halfway up the stair. Alba's alarmed shrieks echoed up the grand staircase.

Bysshe's answer was quick. "A competence for your daughter. Nothing more."

"A thousand a year," George said flatly. "No more than that."

Mary's heart leaped at the figure that doubled the family's income.

Bysshe nodded. "That will do, my lord."

"I want nothing more to do with the girl than that. Nothing whatever."

"Call for pen and paper. And we can bring this to an end."

Two copies were made, and George signed and sealed them with his signet before bidding them all a frigid good-night. The first payment was made that night, one of George's men coming to the door carrying a valise that clanked with gold. Mary gazed at it in amazement — why was George carrying so much?

"Have we done the right thing?" Bysshe wondered, looking at the valise as Claire stuffed it under her bed. "This violence, this extortion?"

"We offered love," Mary said, "and he returned only finance. How else could we deal with him?" She sighed. "And Alba will thank us."

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Claire straightened and looked down at the bed. "I only wanted him to pay," said Claire. "Any other considerations can go to the devil."

THE *VAUDAIRE* blew on, scarcely fainter than before. The water level was still high. Dead fish still floated in the freshwater tide. "I would venture it," Bysshe said, frowning as he watched the dancing *Ariel*, "but not with the children."

Children. Mary's smile was inward as she realized how real her new baby was to Bysshe. "We can afford to stay at the hotel a little longer," she said.

"Still — a reef in the mains'l would make it safe enough."

Mary paused a moment, perhaps to hear the cold summons of Harriet Shelley from beneath the water. There was no sound, but she shivered anyway. "No harm to wait another day."

Bysshe smiled at her hopefully. "Very well. Perhaps we'll have a chance to speak to George again."

"Bysshe, sometimes your optimism is..." She shook her head. "Let us finish our walk."

They walked on through windswept morning streets. The bright sun glared off the white snow and deadly black ice that covered the surrounding high peaks. Soon the snow and ice would melt and threaten avalanche once more. "I am growing weary with this town," Bysshe said.

"Let's go back to our room and read *Chamouni,*" Mary suggested. Mr. Coleridge had been a guest of her father's, and his poem about the Alps a favorite of theirs now they were lodged in Switzerland.

Bysshe was working on writing another descriptive poem on the Vale of Chamouni — unlike Coleridge, he and Mary had actually seen the place — and as an homage to Coleridge, Bysshe was including some reworked lines from *Kubla Khan.*

The everlasting universe of things, she recited to herself, *flows through the mind.*

Lovely stuff. Bysshe's best by far.

On their return to the hotel they found one of George's servants waiting for them. "Lord Newstead would like to see you."

Ah, Mary thought. *He wants his gold back.*

Let him try to take it.

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George waited in the same drawing room in which he'd made his previous night's concession. Despite the bright daylight the room was still lit by lamps — the heavy dark curtains were drawn against the *vaudaire.* George was standing straight as a whip in the center of the room, a dangerous light in his eyes. Mary wondered if this was how he looked in battle.

"Mr. Shelley," George said, and bowed, "I would like to hire your boat to take my party to Geneva."

Bysshe blinked. "I — " he began, then, "*Ariel* is small, only twenty-five feet. Your party is very large and — "

"The local commissaire visited me this morning," George interrupted. "He has forbidden me to depart Montreux. As it is vital for me to leave at once, I must find other means. And I am prepared to pay well for them."

Bysshe looked at Mary, then at George. Hesitated again. "I suppose it would be possible..."

"Why is it," Mary demanded, "that you are forbidden to leave?"

George folded his arms, looked down at her. "I have broken no law. It is a ridiculous political matter."

Bysshe offered a smile. "If that's all, then..."

Mary interrupted. "If Mr. Shelley and I end up in jail as a result of this, I wonder how ridiculous it will seem."

Bysshe looked at her, shocked. "Mary!"

Mary kept her eyes on George. "Why should we help you?"

"Because..." He paused, ran a nervous hand through his hair. Not used, Mary thought, to justifying himself.

"Because," he said finally, "I am assisting someone who is fleeing oppression."

"Fleeing a husband?"

"Husband?" George looked startled. "No — her husband is abroad and cannot protect her." He stepped forward, his color high, his nostrils flared like those of a warhorse. "She is fleeing the attentions of a seducer — a powerful man who has callously used her to gain wealth and influence. I intend to aid her in escaping his power."

Bysshe's eyes blazed. "Of *course* I will aid you!"

Mary watched this display of chivalry with a sinking heart. The masculine confraternity had excluded her, had lost her within its own rituals and condescension.

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"I will pay you a further hundred — " George began.

"Please, my lord. I and my little boat are entirely at your service in this noble cause."

George stepped forward, clasped his hand. "Mr. Omnibus, I am in your debt."

The *vaudaire* wailed at the window. Mary wondered if it was Harriet's call, and her hands clenched into fists. She would resist the cry if she could.

Bysshe turned to Mary. "We must prepare." Heavy in her pregnancy, she followed him from the drawing room, up the stair, toward their own rooms. "I will deliver Lord Newstead and his lady to Geneva, and you and Claire can join me there when the roads are cleared. Or if weather is suitable I will return for you."

"I will go with you," Mary said. "Of course."

Bysshe seemed surprised that she would accompany him on this piece of masculine knight-errantry. "It may not be entirely safe on the lake," he said.

"I'll make it safer — you'll take fewer chances with me aboard. And if I'm with you, George is less likely to inspire you to run off to South America on some noble mission or other."

"I wouldn't do that." Mildly. "And I think you are being a little severe."

"What has George done for us that we should risk anything for him?"

"I do not serve him, but his lady."

"Of whom he has told you nothing. You don't even know her name. And in any case, you seem perfectly willing to risk *her* life on this venture."

Alba's cries sounded through the door of their room. Bysshe paused a moment, resignation plain in his eyes, then opened the door. "It's for Alba, really," he said. "The more contact between George and our little family, the better it may be for her. The better chance we will have to melt his heart."

He opened the door. Claire was holding her colicky child. Tears filled her black eyes. "Where have you been for so long? I was afraid you were gone forever!"

"You know better than that." Mary took the baby from her, the gesture so natural that sadness took a moment to come — the memory that she had held her own lost child this way, held it to her breast and felt the touch of its cold lips.

"And what is this about George?" Claire demanded.

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"He wants me to take him down the lake," Bysshe said. "And Mary wishes to join us. You and Alba can remain here until the roads are clear."

Claire's voice rose to a shriek. *"No! Never!"* She lunged for Alba and snatched the girl from Mary's astonished arms. "You're going to abandon me — just like George! You're all going to Geneva to laugh at me!"

"Of course not," Bysshe said reasonably.

Mary stared at her sister, tried to speak, but Claire's cries trampled over her intentions.

"You're abandoning me! I'm useless to you — worthless! You'll soon have your own baby!"

Mary tried to comfort Claire, but it was hopeless. Claire screamed and shuddered and wept, convinced that she would be left forever in Montreux. In the end there was no choice but to take her along. Mary received mean satisfaction in watching Bysshe as he absorbed this reality, as his chivalrous, noble-minded expedition alongside the hero of Waterloo turned into a low family comedy, George and his old lover, his new lover, and his wailing bastard.

And ghosts. Harriet, lurking under the water. And their dead baby calling.

Ariel bucked like a horse on the white-topped waves as the *vaudaire* keened in the rigging. Frigid spray flew in Mary's face and her feet slid on slippery planking. Her heart thrashed into her throat. The boat seemed half-full of water. She gave a despairing look over her shoulder at the retreating rowboat they'd hired to bring them from the jetty to their craft.

"Bysshe!" she said. "This is hopeless."

"Better once we're under way. See that the cuddy will be comfortable for Claire and Alba."

"This is madness."

Bysshe licked joyfully at the freshwater spray that ran down his lips. "We'll be fine, I'm sure."

He was a much better sailor than she: she had to trust him. She opened the sliding hatch to the cuddy, the little cabin forward, and saw several inches of water sloshing in the bottom. The cushions on the little seats were soaked. Wearily, she looked up at Bysshe.

"We'll have to bail."

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"Very well."

It took a quarter hour to bail out the boat, during which time Claire paced back and forth on the little jetty, Alba in her arms. She looked like a specter with her pale face peering out from her dark shawl.

Bysshe cast off the gaskets that reefed the mainsail to the boom, then jumped forward to the halyards and raised the sail on its gaff. The wind tore at the canvas with a sound like a cannonade, open-hand slaps against Mary's ears. The shrouds were taut as bowstrings. Bysshe reefed the sail down, hauled the halyards and topping lift again till the canvas was taut, lowered the leeboards, then asked Mary to take the tiller while he cast *Ariel* off from its buoy.

Bysshe braced himself against the gunwale as he hauled on the mooring line, drawing *Ariel* up against the wind. When Bysshe cast off from the buoy the boat paid instantly off the wind and the sail filled with a rolling boom. Water surged under the boat's counter and suddenly, before Mary knew it, *Ariel* was flying fast. Fear closed a fist around her windpipe as the little boat heeled and the tiller almost yanked her arms from their sockets. She could hear Harriet's wails in the windsong. Mary dug her heels into the planks and hauled the tiller up to her chest, keeping *Ariel* up into the wind. Frigid water boiled up over the lee counter, pouring into the boat like a waterfall.

Bysshe leapt gracefully aft and released the mainsheet. The sail boomed out with a crash that rattled Mary's bones and the boat righted itself. Bysshe took the tiller from Mary, sheeted in, leaned out into the wind as the boat picked up speed. There was a grin on his face.

"Sorry!" he said. "I should have let the sheet go before we set out."

Bysshe tacked and brought *Ariel* into the wind near the jetty. The sail boomed like thunder as it spilled wind. Waves slammed the boat into the jetty. The mast swayed wildly. The stone jetty was at least four feet taller than the boat's deck. Mary helped Claire with the luggage — gold clanked heavily in one bag — then took Alba while Bysshe assisted Claire into the boat.

"It's *wet*," Claire said when she saw the cuddy.

"Take your heavy cloak out of your bags and sit on it," Mary said.

"This is *terrible*," Claire said, and lowered herself carefully into the cuddy.

"Go forrard," Bysshe said to Mary, "and push off from the jetty as hard

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as you can."

Forrard. Bysshe so enjoyed being nautical. Clumsy in skirts and pregnancy, Mary climbed atop the cuddy and did as she was asked. The booming sail filled, Mary snatched at the shrouds for balance, and *Ariel* leaped from the jetty like a stone from a child's catapult. Mary made her way across the tilting deck to the cockpit. Bysshe was leaning out to weather, his big hands controlling the tiller easily, his long fair hair streaming in the wind.

"I won't ask you to do that again," he said. "George should help from this point."

George and his lady would join the boat at another jetty — there was less chance that the authorities would intervene if they weren't seen where another Englishman was readying his boat.

Ariel raced across the waterfront, foam boiling under its counter. The second jetty — a wooden one — approached swiftly, with cloaked figures upon it. Bysshe rounded into the wind, canvas thundering, and brought *Ariel* neatly to the dock. George's men seized shrouds and a mooring line and held the boat in its place.

George's round hat was jammed down over his brows and the collar of his cloak was turned up, but any attempt at anonymity was wrecked by his famous laced boots. He seized a shroud and leaped easily into the boat, then turned to help his lady.

She had stepped back, frightened by the gunshot cracks of the luffing sail, the wild swings of the boom. Dressed in a blue silk dress, broad-brimmed bonnet, and heavy cloak, she frowned with her haughty lower lip, looking disdainfully at the little boat and its odd collection of passengers.

George reassured his companion. He and one of his men, the swordmaster Pásmány, helped her into the boat, held her arm as she ducked under the boom.

George grabbed the brim of his hat to keep the wind from carrying it away and performed hasty introductions. "Mr. and Mrs. Shelley. The Comtesse Laufenburg."

Mary strained her memory, trying to remember if she'd ever heard the name before. The comtesse smiled a superior smile and tried to be pleasant. "Enchanted to make cognizance of you," she said in French.

A baby wailed over the sound of flogging canvas. George straightened, his eyes a little wild.

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"Claire is here?" he asked.

"She did not desire to be abandoned in Montreux," Mary said, trying to stress the word *abandoned.*

"My God!" George said. "I wish you had greater consideration of the...realities."

"Claire is free and may do as she wishes," Mary said.

George clenched his teeth. He took the comtesse by her arm and drew her toward the cuddy.

"The boat will be better balanced," Bysshe called after, "if the comtesse will sit on the weather side." *And perhaps,* Mary thought, *we won't capsize.*

George gave Bysshe a blank look. "The larboard side," Bysshe said helpfully. Another blank look.

"Hang it! The left."

"Very well."

George and the comtesse ducked down the hatchway. Mary would have liked to have eavesdropped on the comtesse's introduction to Claire, but the furious rattling sail obscured the phrases, if any. George came up, looking grim, and Pásmány began tossing luggage toward him. Other than a pair of valises, most of it was military: a familiar-looking pistol case, a pair of sabers, a brace of carbines. George stowed it all in the cuddy. Then Pásmány himself leaped into the boat, and George signaled all was ready. Bysshe placed George by the weather rail, and Pásmány squatted on the weather foredeck.

"If you gentlemen would push us off?" Bysshe said.

The sail filled and *Ariel* began to move fast, rising at each wave and thudding into the troughs. Spray rose at each impact. Bysshe trimmed the sail, the luff trembling just a little, the rest full and taut, then cleated the mainsheet down.

"A long reach down the length of the lake," Bysshe said with a smile. "Easy enough sailing, if a little hard on the ladies."

George peered out over the cuddy, his eyes searching the bank. The old castle of Chillon bulked ominously on the shore, just south of Montreux.

"When do we cross the border into Geneva?" George asked.

"Why does it matter?" Bysshe said. "Geneva joined the Swiss Confederation last year."

"But the administrations are not yet united. And the more jurisdictions that lie between the comtesse and her pursuers, the happier I will be."

George cast an uncomfortable look astern. With spray dotting his cloak,

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his hat clamped down on his head, his body disposed awkwardly on the weather side of the boat, George seemed thoroughly miserable — and in an overwhelming flood of sudden understanding, Mary suddenly knew why. It was over for him. His noble birth, his fame, his entire life to this point — all was as naught. Passion had claimed him for its own. His career had ended: there was no place for him in the army, in diplomatic circles, even in polite society. He'd thrown it all away in this mad impulse of passion.

He was an exile now, and the only people whom he could expect to associate with him were other exiles.

Like the exiles aboard *Ariel*.

Perhaps, Mary thought, he was only now realizing it. Poor George. She actually felt sorry for him.

The castle of Chillon fell astern, like a grand symbol of George's hopes, a world of possibility not realized.

"Beg pardon, my lord," she said, "but where do you intend to go?"

George frowned. "France, perhaps," he said. "The comtesse has...some friends...in France. England, if France won't suit, but we won't be able to stay there long. America, if necessary."

"Can the Prince Regent intervene on your behalf?"

George's smile was grim. "If he wishes. But he's subject to strange fits of morality, particularly if the sins in question remind him of his own. Prinny will *not* wish to be reminded of Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Hertford. He *does* wish to look upright in the eyes of the nation. And he has no loyalty to his friends, none at all." He gave a poised, slow-motion shrug. "Perhaps he will help, if the fit is on him. But I think not." He reached inside his greatcoat, patted an inside pocket. "Do you think I can light a cigar in this wind? If so, I hope it will not discomfort you, Mrs. Shelley."

He managed a spark in his strike-a-light, puffed madly till the tinder caught, then ignited his cigar and turned to Bysshe. "I found your poems, Mr. Omnibus. Your *Queen Mab* and *Alastor*. The latter of which I liked better, though I liked both well enough."

Bysshe looked at him in surprise. Wind whistled through the shrouds. "How did you find *Mab*? There were only seventy copies, and I'm certain I can account for each one."

George seemed pleased with himself. "There are few doors closed to me." Darkness clouded his face. "Or rather, *were*." With a sigh. He wiped

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spray from his ear with the back of his hand.

"I'm surprised that you liked *Mab* at all," Bysshe said quickly, "as its ideas are so contrary to your own."

"You expressed them well enough. As a verse treatise of Mr. Godwin's political thought, I believed it done soundly — as soundly as such a thing *can* be done. And I think you can have it published properly now — it's hardly a threat to public order, Godwin's thought being so out of fashion even among radicals." He drew deliberately on his cigar, then waved it. The wind tore the cigar smoke from his mouth in little wisps. "*Alastor,* though better poetry, seemed in contrast to have little thought behind it. I never understood what that fellow was *doing* on the boat — was it a metaphor for life? I kept waiting for something to *happen.*"

Mary bristled at George's condescension. What are *you* doing on this little boat? she wanted to ask.

Bysshe, however, looked apologetic. "I'm writing better things now."

"He's writing *wonderful* things now," Mary said. "An ode to Mont Blanc. An essay on Christianity. A hymn to intellectual beauty."

George gave her an amused look. "Mrs. Shelley's tone implies that, to me, intellectual beauty is entirely a stranger, but she misunderstands my point. I found it remarkable that the same pen could produce both *Queen Mab* and *Alastor,* and have no doubt that so various a talent will produce very good work in the poetry line — provided," nodding to Bysshe, "that Mr. Shelley continues in it, and doesn't take up engineering again, or chemistry." He grinned. "Or become a sea captain."

"He is and remains a poet," Mary said firmly. She used a corner of her shawl to wipe spray from her cheek.

"Who else do you like, my lord?" Bysshe asked.

"Poets, you mean? Scott, above all. Shakespeare, who is sound on political matters as well as having a magnificent...shall I call it a *stride*? Burns, the great poet of my country. And our Laureate."

"Mr. Southey was kind to me when we met," Bysshe said. "And Mrs. Southey made wonderful tea-cakes. But I wish I admired his work more." He looked up. "What do you think of Milton? The Maie and I read him constantly."

George shrugged. "Dour Puritan fellow. I'm surprised you can stand him at all."

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"His verse is glorious. And he wasn't a Puritan, but an Independent, like Cromwell—his philosophy was quite unorthodox. He believed, for example, in plural marriage."

George's eyes glittered. "Did he now."

"Ay. And his Satan is a magnificent creation, far more interesting than any of his angels or his simpering pedantic Christ. That long, raging fall from grace, into darkness visible."

George's brows knit. Perhaps he was contemplating his own long fall from the Heaven of polite society. His eyes turned to Mary.

"And how is the originator of Mr. Shelley's political thought? How does your father, Mrs. Shelley?"

"He is working on a novel. An important work."

"I am pleased to hear it. Does he progress?"

Mary was going to answer simply "Very well," but Bysshe's answer came first. "Plagued by lack of money," he said. "We will be going to England to succor him after this, ah, errand is completed."

"Your generosity does you credit," George said, and then resentment entered his eyes and his lip curled. "Of course, you will be able to better afford it, now."

Bysshe's answer was mild. "Mr. Godwin lives partly with our support, but he will not speak to us since I eloped with his daughter. You will not acknowledge Alba, but at least you've been...persuaded...to do well by her."

George preferred not to rise to this, settled instead for clarification. "You support a man who won't acknowledge you?"

"It is not my father-in-law I support, but rather the author of *Political Justice.*"

"A nice discernment," George observed. "Perhaps over-nice."

"One does what goodness one can. And one hopes people will respond." Looking at George, who smiled cynically around his cigar.

"Your charity speaks well for you. But perhaps Mr. Godwin would have greater cause to finish his book if poverty were not being made so convenient for him."

Mary felt herself flushing red. But Bysshe's reply again was mild. "It isn't that simple. Mr. Godwin has dependents, and the public that once celebrated his thought has, alas, forgotten him. His novel may retrieve matters. But a fine thing such as this work cannot be rushed—not if it is to have the impact

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it deserves."

"I will bow to your expertise in matters of literary production. But still...to support someone who will not even speak to you — that is charity indeed. And it does not speak well for Mr. Godwin's gratitude."

"My father is a great man!" Mary knew she was speaking hotly, and she bit back on her anger. "But he judges by a...a very high standard of morality. He will accept support from a sincere admirer, but he has not yet understood the depth of sentiment between Bysshe and myself, and believes that Bysshe has done my reputation harm — not," flaring again, "that I would care if he had."

Ariel thudded into a wave trough, and George winced at the impact. He adjusted his seat on the rail and nodded. "Mr. Godwin will accept money from an admirer, but not letters from an in-law. And Mr. Shelley will support the author of *Political Justice*, but not *his* in-laws."

"And *you*," Mary said, "will support a blackmailer, but not a daughter."

George's eyes turned to stone. Mary realized she had gone too far for this small boat and close company.

"Gentlemen, it's cold," she announced. "I will withdraw."

She made her way carefully into the cuddy. The tall comtesse was disposed uncomfortably, on wet cushions, by the hatch, the overhead planking brushing the top of her bonnet. Her gaze was mild, but her lip was haughty. There was a careful three inches between her and Claire, who was nursing Alba and, clearly enough, a grudge.

Mary walked past them to the peak, sat carefully on a wet cushion near Claire. Their knees collided every time *Ariel* fell down a wave. The cuddy smelled of wet stuffing and stale water. There was still water sluicing about on the bottom.

Mary looked at Claire's baby and felt sadness like an ache in her breast.

Claire regarded her resentfully. "The French bitch hates us," she whispered urgently. "Look at her expression."

Mary wished Claire had kept her voice down. Mary leaned out to look at the comtesse, managed a smile. "Vous parlez anglais?" she asked.

"Non. Je regrette. Parles-tu français?" The comtesse had a peculiar accent. As, with a name like Laufenburg, one might expect.

Pleasant of her, though, to use the intimate tu. "Je comprends un peu." Claire's French was much better than hers, but Claire clearly had no interest

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in conversation.

The comtesse looked at the nursing baby. A shadow flitted across her face. "My own child," in French, "I was forced to leave behind."

"I'm sorry." For a moment Mary hated the comtesse for having a child to leave, that and for the abandonment itself.

No. Bysshe, she remembered, had left his own children. It did not make one unnatural. Sometimes there were circumstances.

Speech languished after this unpromising beginning. Mary leaned her head against the planking and tried to sleep, sadly aware of the cold seep of water up her skirts. The boat's movement was too violent to be restful, but she composed herself deliberately for sleep. Images floated through her mind: the great crumbling keep of Chillon, standing above the surging gray water like the setting of one of "Monk" Lewis's novels; a gray cat eating a blushing rose; a figure, massive and threatening, somehow both George and her father Godwin, flinging back the bed-curtains to reveal, in the bright light of morning, the comtesse Laufenburg's placid blonde face with its outthrust, Habsburg lip.

Habsburg. Mary sat up with a cry and banged her skull on the deckhead.

She cast a wild look at Claire and the comtesse; saw them both drowsing, Alba asleep in Claire's lap. The boat was rolling madly in a freshening breeze: there were ominous, threatening little shrieks of wind in the rigging. The cuddy stank badly.

Mary made her way out of the cuddy, clinging to the sides of the hatch as the boat sought to pitch her out. Bysshe was holding grimly to the tiller with one big hand, controlling the sheet with the other while spray soaked his coat; George and Pásmány were hanging to the shrouds to keep from sliding down the tilted deck.

Astern was Lausanne, north of the lake, and the Cornettes to the south; and Mont Billiat, looming over the valley of the Dranse to the south, was right abeam: they were smack in the middle of the lake, with the *vaudaire* wind funneling down the valley, stronger than ever with the mountain boundary out of the way.

Mary seized the rail, hauled herself up the tilting deck toward George. "I know your secret," she said. "I know who your woman is."

George's face ran with spray; his auburn hair was plastered to the back of his neck. He fixed her with eyes colder than the glaciers of Mont Blanc.

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"Indeed," he said.

"Marie-Louise of the house of Habsburg." Hot anger pulsed through her, burned against the cold spindrift on her face. "Former Empress of the French!"

Restlessly, George turned his eyes away. "Indeed," he said again.

Mary seized a shroud and dragged herself to the rail next to him. Bysshe watched in shock as Mary shouted into the wind. "Her husband abroad! Abroad, forsooth — all the way to St. Helena! Forced to leave her child behind, because her father would never let Napoleon's son out of his control for an instant. Even a Habsburg lip — my God!"

"Very clever, Miss Godwin. But I believe you have divined my sentiments on the subject of clever women." George gazed ahead, toward Geneva. "Now you see why I wish to be away."

"I see only vanity!" Mary raged. "Colossal vanity! You can't stop fighting Napoleon even now! Even when the battlefield is only a bed!"

George glared at her. "Is it my damned fault that Napoleon could never keep his women?"

"It's your damned fault that *you* keep her!"

George opened his mouth to spit out a reply and then the *vaudaire*, like a giant hand, took *Ariel's* mast in its grasp and slammed the frail boat over. Bysshe cried out and hauled the tiller to his chest and let the mainsheet go, all far too late. The deck pitched out from under Mary's heels and she clung to the shroud for dear life. Pásmány shouted in Hungarian. There was a roar as the sail hit the water. The lake foamed over the lee rail and the wind tore Mary's breath away. There were screams from the cuddy as water poured into the little cabin.

"Halyards and topping lift!" Bysshe gasped. He was clinging to the weather rail: a breaker exploded in his face and he gasped for air. "Let 'em go!"

If the sail filled with water all was lost. Mary let go of the shroud and palmed her way across the vertical deck. Freezing lakewater clutched at her ankles. Harriet Shelley shrieked her triumph in Mary's ears like the wind. Mary lurched forward to the mast, flung the halyard and topping lift off their cleats. The sail sagged free, empty of everything but the water that poured onto its canvas surface, turning it into a giant weight that would drag the boat over. Too late.

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"Save the ladies, George!" Bysshe called. His face was dead-white but his voice was calm. "I can't swim!"

Water boiled up Mary's skirts. She could feel the dead weight dragging her down as she clutched at George's leg and hauled herself up the deck. She screamed as her unborn child protested, a gouging pain deep in her belly.

George raged wildly. "Damn it, Shelley, what can I *do*?" He had a leg over one of the shrouds; the other was Mary's support. The wind had taken his hat and his cloak rattled around him like wind-filled canvas.

"Cut the mast free!"

George turned to Mary. "My sword! Get it from the cabin!"

Mary looked down and into the terrified black eyes of Claire, half-out of the cuddy. She held a wailing Alba in her arms. "Take the baby!" she shrieked.

"Give me a sword!" Mary said. A wave broke over the boat, soaking them all in icy rain. Mary thought of Harriet smiling, her hair trailing like seaweed.

"Save my baby!"

"The *sword!* Byron's *sword! Give it!*" Mary clung to George's leg with one hand and thrust the crying babe away with the other.

"I hate you!" Claire shrieked, but she turned and fumbled for George's sword. She held it up out of the hatch, and Mary took the cut steel hilt in her hand and drew it rasping from the scabbard. She held it blindly above her head and felt George's firm hand close over hers and take the sabre away. The pain in her belly was like a knife. Through the boat and her spine she felt the thudding blows as George hacked at the shrouds, and then there was a rending as the mast splintered and *Ariel*, relieved of its top-hamper, swung suddenly upright.

Half the lake seemed to splash into the boat as it came off its beam-ends. George pitched over backwards as *Ariel* righted itself, but Mary clung to his leg and kept him from going into the lake while he dragged himself to safety over the rail.

Another wave crashed over them. Mary clutched at her belly and moaned. The pain was ebbing. The boat pirouetted on the lake as the wind took it, and then *Ariel* jerked to a halt. The wreckage of the mast was acting as a sea-anchor, moderating the wave action, keeping the boat stable. Alba's screams floated high above *Ariel's* remains.

Wood floats, Mary remembered dully. And *Ariel* was wood, no matter

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how much water slopped about in her bottom.

Shelley staggered to his feet, shin-deep in lake water. "By God, George," he gasped. "You've saved us."

"By God," George answered, "so I have." Mary looked up from the deck to see George with the devil's light in his eyes, his color high and his sabre in his hand. So, she reckoned, he must have seemed to Napoleon at Genappe. George bent and peered into the cuddy.

"Are the ladies all right?"

"Je suis bien, merci." From the Austrian princess.

"Damn you to hell, George!" Claire cried. George only grinned.

"I see we are well," he said.

And then Mary felt the warm blood running down the insides of her legs, and knew that George was wrong.

MARY LAY on a bed in the farmhouse sipping warm brandy. Reddening cloths were packed between her legs. The hemorrhage had not stopped, though at least there was no pain. Mary could feel the child moving within her, as if struggling in its terror. Over the click of knitting needles, she could hear the voices of the men in the kitchen, and smell George's cigar.

The large farm, sitting below its pastures that stretched up the Noirmont, was owned by a white-mustached old man named Fleury, a man who seemed incapable of surprise or confusion even when armed men arrived at his doorstep, carrying between them a bleeding woman and a sack filled with gold. He turned Mary over to his wife, hitched up his trousers, put his hat on, and went to St. Prex to find a doctor.

Madame Fleury, a large woman unflappable as her husband, tended Mary and made her drink a brandy toddy while she sat by Mary and did her knitting.

When Fleury returned, his news wasn't good. The local surgeon had gone up the road to set the bones of some workmen caught in an avalanche — perhaps there would be amputations — but he would return as soon as he could. The road west to Geneva was still blocked by the slide; the road east to Lausanne had been cleared. George seemed thoughtful at the news. His voice echoed in from the kitchen. "Perhaps the chase will simply go past," he said in English.

"What sort of pursuit do you anticipate?" Bysshe asked. "Surely you

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don't expect the Austrian Emperor to send his troops into Switzerland."

"Stranger things have happened," George said. "And it may not be the Emperor's own people after us — it might be Neipperg, acting on his own."

Mary knew she'd heard the name before, and tried to recall it. But Bysshe said, "The general? Why would he be concerned?"

There was cynical amusement in George's voice. "Because he's her highness's former lover! I don't imagine he'd like to see his fortune run away."

"Do you credit him with so base a motive?"

George laughed. "In order to prevent Marie-Louise from joining Bonaparte, Prince Metternich *ordered* von Neipperg to leave his wife and to seduce her highness — and that one-eyed scoundrel was only too happy to comply. His reward was to be the co-rulership of Parma, of which her highness was to be Duchess."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Metternich told me at his dinner table over a pipe of tobacco. And Neipperg *boasted* to me, sir!" A sigh, almost a snarl, came from George. "My heart wrung at his words, Mr. Shelley. For I had already met her highness and — " Words failed him for a moment. "I determined to rescue her from Neipperg's clutches, though all the Hungarian Grenadiers of the Empire stood in the way!"

"That was most admirable, my lord," Bysshe said quietly.

Claire's voice piped up. "Who is this Neipperg?"

"Adam von Neipperg is a cavalry officer who defeated Murat," Bysshe said. "That's all I know of him."

George's voice was thoughtful. "He's the best the Austrians have. Quite the *beau sabreur*, and a diplomat as well. He persuaded Crown Prince Bernadotte to switch sides before the battle of Leipzig. And yes, he defeated Murat on the field of Tolentino, a few weeks before Waterloo. Command of the Austrian army was another of Prince Metternich's rewards for his...services."

Murat, Mary knew, was Napoleon's great cavalry general. Neipperg, the best Austrian cavalryman, had defeated Murat, and now Britain's greatest horseman had defeated Napoleon *and* Neipperg, one on the battlefield and both in bed.

Such a competitive little company of cavaliers, she thought. Madame

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Fleury's knitting needles clacked out a complicated pattern.

"You think he's going to come after you?" Bysshe asked.

"*I* would," simply. "And neither he nor I would care what the Swiss think about it. And he'll find enough officers who will want to fight for the, ah, *honor* of their royal family. And he certainly has scouts or agents among the Swiss looking for me — surely one of them visited the commissaire of Montreux."

"I see." Mary heard the sound of Bysshe rising from his seat. "I must see to Mary."

He stepped into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed, took her hand. Madame Fleury barely looked up from her knitting.

"Are you better, Pecksie?"

"Nothing has changed." *I'm still dying,* she thought.

Bysshe sighed. "I'm sorry," he said, "to have exposed you to such danger. And now I don't know what to do."

"And all for so little."

Bysshe was thoughtful. "Do you think liberty is so little? And Byron — the voice of monarchy and reaction — fighting for freedom! Think of it!"

My life is bleeding away, Mary thought incredulously, *and his child with it.* There was poison in her voice when she answered.

"This isn't about the freedom of a woman, it's about the freedom of one man to do what he wants."

Bysshe frowned at her.

"He can't love," Mary insisted. "He felt no love for his wife, or for Claire." Bysshe tried to hush her — her voice was probably perfectly audible in the kitchen. But it was pleasing for her not to give a damn.

"It's not love he feels for that poor woman in the cellar," she said. "His passions are entirely concerned with himself — and now that he can't exorcise them on the battlefield, he's got to find other means."

"Are you certain?"

"He's a mad whirlwind of destruction! Look what he did to Claire. And now he's wrecked *Ariel,* and he may yet involve us all in a battle — with Austrian cavalry, forsooth! He'll destroy us all if we let him."

"Perhaps it will not come to that."

George appeared in the door. He was wrapped in a blanket and carried a carbine, and if he was embarrassed by what he'd heard, he failed to display

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it. "With your permission, Mr. Shelley, I'm going to try to sink your boat. It sits on a rock just below our location, a pistol pointed at our head."

Bysshe looked at Mary. "Do as you wish."

"I'll give you privacy, then." And pointedly closed the door.

Mary heard his bootsteps march out, the outside door open and close. She put her hand on Bysshe's arm. *I am bleeding to death,* she thought. "Promise me you will take no part in anything," she said. "George will try to talk you into defending the princess — he knows you're a good shot."

"But what of Marie-Louise? To be dragged back to Austria by force of arms — what a prospect! An outrage, inhuman and degrading."

I am bleeding to death, Mary thought. But she composed a civil reply. "Her condition saddens me. But she was born a pawn and has lived a pawn her entire life. However this turns out, she will be a pawn either of George or of Metternich, and we cannot change that. It is the evil of monarchy and tyranny that has made her so. We may be thankful we were not born among her class."

There were tears in Bysshe's eyes. "Very well. If you think it best, I will not lift a hand in this."

Mary put her arms around him, held herself close to his warmth. She clenched trembling hands behind his back.

Soon, she thought, *I will lack the strength to do even this. And then I will die.*

There was a warm and spreading lake between her legs. She felt very drowsy as she held Bysshe, the effects of the brandy, and she closed her eyes and tried to rest. Bysshe stroked her cheek and hair. Mary, for a moment, dreamed.

She dreamed of pursuit, a towering, shrouded figure stalking her over the lake — but the lake was frozen, and as Mary fled across the ice she found other people standing there, people to whom she ran for help only to discover them all dead, frozen in their places and covered with frost. Terrified, she ran among them, seeing to her further horror that she knew them all: her mother and namesake; and Mr. Godwin; and George, looking at her insolently with eyes of black ice; and lastly the figure of Harriet Shelley, a woman she had never met in life but who Mary knew at once. Harriet stood rooted to a patch of ice and held in her arms the frost-swathed figure of a child. And despite the rime that covered the tiny face, Mary knew at once, and with agonized

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despair, just whose child Harriet carried so triumphantly in her arms.

She woke, terror pounding in her heart. There was a gunshot from outside. She felt Bysshe stiffen. Another shot. And then the sound of pounding feet.

"They're here, damn it!" George called. "And my shot missed!"

Gunfire and the sound of hammering swirled through Mary's perceptions. Furniture was shifted, doors barricaded, weapons laid ready. The shutters had already been closed against the *vaudaire,* so no one had to risk himself securing the windows. Claire and Alba came into Mary's room, the both of them screaming; and Mary, not giving a damn any longer, sent them both out. George put them in the cellar with the Austrian princess — Mary was amused that they seemed doomed to share quarters together. Bysshe, throughout, only sat on the bed and held Mary in his arms. He seemed calm, but his heart pounded against her ear. M. Fleury appeared, loading an old Charleville musket as he offhandedly explained that he had served in one of Louis XVI's mercenary Swiss regiments. His wife put down her knitting needles, poured buckshot into her apron pockets, and went off with him to serve as his loader. Afterwards Mary wondered if that particular episode, that vision of the old man with his gun and powder horn, had been a dream — but no, Madame Fleury was gone, her pockets filled with lead.

Eventually the noise died away. George came in with his Mantons stuffed in his belt, looking pleased with himself. "I think we stand well," he said. "This place is fine as a fort. At Waterloo we held Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte against worse — and Neipperg will have no artillery. The odds aren't bad — I counted only eight of them." He looked at Bysshe. "Unless you are willing to join us, Mr. Shelley, in defense of her highness's liberty."

Bysshe sat up. "I wish no man's blood on my hands." Mary rejoiced at the firmness in his voice.

"I will not argue against your conscience, but if you won't fight, then perhaps you can load for me?"

"What of Mary?" Bysshe asked.

Indeed, Mary thought. *What of me!*

"Can we arrange for her, and for Claire and Alba, to leave this house?"

George shook his head. "They don't dare risk letting you go — you'd just inform the Swiss authorities. I could negotiate a cease-fire to allow you to

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become their prisoners, but then you'd be living in the barn or the outdoors instead of more comfortably in here." He looked down at Mary. "I do not think we should move your lady in any case. Here in the house it is safe enough."

"But what if there's a battle? My God — there's already been shooting!"

"No one was hurt, you'll note — though if I'd had a Baker or a jäger rifle instead of my puisny little carbine, I daresay I'd have dropped one of them. No — what will happen now is that they'll either try an assault, which will take a while to organize, because they're all scattered out watching the house, and which will cost them dearly in the end...or they'll wait. They don't know how many people we have in here, and they'll be cautious on that account. We're inside, with plenty of food and fuel and ammunition, and they're in the outdoors facing unseasonably cold weather. And the longer they wait, the more likely it will be that our local Swiss yeomen will discover them, and then..." He gave a low laugh. "Austrian soldiers have never fared well in Switzerland, not since the days of William Tell. Our Austrian friends will be arrested and imprisoned."

"But the surgeon? Will they not let the surgeon pass?"

"I can't say."

Bysshe stared. "My God! Can't you speak to them?"

"I will ask if you like. But I don't know what a surgeon can do that we cannot."

Bysshe looked desperate. "There must be something that will stop the bleeding!"

Yes, Mary thought. *Death. Harriet has won.*

George gazed down at Mary with thoughtful eyes. "A Scotch midwife would sit her in a tub of icewater."

Bysshe stiffened like a dog on point. "Is there ice? Is there an ice cellar?" He rushed out of the room. Mary could hear him stammering out frantic questions in French, then Fleury's offhand reply. When Bysshe came back he looked stricken. "There is an icehouse, but it's out behind the barn."

"And in enemy hands." George sighed. "Well, I will ask if they will permit Madame Fleury to bring ice into the house, and pass the surgeon through when he comes."

George left the room and commenced a shouted conversation in French with someone outside. Mary winced at the volume of George's voice. The

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voice outside spoke French with a harsh accent.

No, she understood. They would not permit ice or a surgeon to enter a house.

"They suspect a plot, I suppose," George reported. He stood wearily in the doorway. "Or they think one of my men is wounded."

"They want to make you watch someone die," Mary said. "And hope it will make you surrender."

George looked at her. "Yes, you comprehend their intent," he said. "That is precisely what they want." Bysshe looked horrified.

George's look turned intent. "And what does Mistress Mary want?"

Mary closed her eyes. "Mistress Mary wants to live, and to hell with you all."

George laughed, a low and misanthropic chuckle. "Very well. Live you shall — and I believe I know the way."

He returned to the other room, and Mary heard his raised voice again. He was asking, in French, what the intruders wanted, and in passing comparing their actions to Napoleon's abduction of the Duc d'Enghien, justly abhorred by all nations.

"A telling hit," Mary said. "Good old George." She wrapped her two small pale hands around one of Bysshe's big ones.

The same voice answered, demanding that Her Highness the Duchess of Parma be surrendered. George returned that her highness was here of her own free will, and that she commanded that they withdraw to their own borders and trouble her no more. The emissary said his party was acting for the honor of Austria and the House of Habsburg. George announced that he felt free to doubt that their shameful actions were in any way honorable, and he was prepared to prove it, *corps-à-corps*, if *Feldmarschall-leutnant* von Neipperg was willing to oblige him.

"My God!" Bysshe said. "He's calling the blackguard out!"

Mary could only laugh. A duel, fought for an Austrian princess and Mary's bleeding womb.

The other asked for time to consider. George gave it.

"This neatly solves our dilemma, don't it?" he said after he returned. "If I beat Neipperg, the rest of those German puppies won't have direction — they'd be on the road back to Austria. Her royal highness and I will be able to make our way to a friendly country. No magistrates, no awkward

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questions, and a long head start." He smiled. "And all the ice in the world for Mistress Mary."

"And if you lose?" Bysshe asked.

"It ain't to be thought of. I'm a master of the sabre, I practice with Pásmány almost daily, and whatever Neipperg's other virtues I doubt he can compare with me in the art of the sword. The only question," he turned thoughtful, "is whether we can trust his offer. If there's treachery..."

"Or if he insists on pistols!" Mary found she couldn't resist pointing this out. "You didn't precisely cover yourself with glory the last time I saw you shoot."

George only seemed amused. "Neipperg only has one eye — I doubt he's much of a shot, either. My second would have to insist on a sabre fight," and here he smiled, *"pour l'honneur de la cavalerie."*

Somehow Mary found this satisfying. "Go fight, George. I know you love your legend more than you ever loved that Austrian girl — and this will make a nice end to it."

George only chuckled again, while Bysshe looked shocked. "Truthful Mistress Mary," George said. "Never without your sting."

"I see no point in politeness from this position."

"You would have made a good soldier, Mrs. Shelley."

Longing fell upon Mary. "I would have made a better mother," she said, and felt tears sting her eyes.

"God, Maie!" Bysshe cried. "What I would not give!" He bent over her and began to weep.

It was, Mary considered, about time, and then reflected that death had made her satirical.

George watched for a long moment, then withdrew. Mary could hear his boots pacing back and forth in the kitchen, and then a different, younger voice called from outside.

The *Feldmarschall-leutnant* had agreed to the encounter. He, the new voice, was prepared to present himself as von Neipperg's second.

"A soldier all right," George commented. "Civilian clothes, but he's got that sprig of greenery that Austrian troops wear in their hats." His voice lifted. "That's far enough, laddie!" He switched to French and said that his second would be out shortly. Then his bootsteps returned to Mary's rooms and put a hand on Bysshe's shoulder.

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"Mr. Shelley," he said, "I regret this intrusion, but I must ask — will you do me the honor of standing my second in this affaire?"

"Bysshe!" Mary cried. "Of course not!"

Bysshe blinked tear-dazzled eyes but managed to speak clearly enough. "I'm totally opposed to the practice. It's vicious and wasteful and utterly without moral foundation. It reeks of death and the dark ages and ruling-class affectation."

George's voice was gentle. "There are no other gentlemen here," he said. "Pásmány is a servant, and I can't see sending our worthy M. Fleury out to negotiate with those little noblemen. And — " He looked at Mary. "Your lady must have her ice and her surgeon."

Bysshe looked stricken. "I know nothing of how to manage these encounters," he said. "I would not do well by you. If you were to fall as a result of my bungling, I should never forgive myself."

"I will tell you what to say, and if he doesn't agree, then bring negotiations to a close."

"Bysshe," Mary reminded, "you said you would have nothing to do with this."

Bysshe wiped tears from his eyes and looked thoughtful.

"Don't you see this is theater?" Mary demanded. "George is adding this scene to his legend — he doesn't give a damn for anyone here!"

George only seemed amused. "You are far from death, madam, I think, to show such spirit," he said. "Come, Mr. Shelley! Despite what Mary thinks, a fight with Neipperg is the only way we can escape without risking the ladies."

"No," Mary said.

Bysshe looked thoroughly unhappy. "Very well," he said. "For Mary's sake, I'll do as you ask, provided I do no violence myself. But I should say that I resent being placed in this...*extraordinary* position in the first place."

Mary settled for glaring at Bysshe.

More negotiations were conducted through the window, and then Bysshe, after receiving a thorough briefing, straightened and brushed his jacket, brushed his knees, put on his hat, and said goodbye to Mary. He was very pale under his freckles.

"Don't forget to point out," George said, "that if von Neipperg attempts treachery, he will be instantly shot dead by my men firing from this house."

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"Quite."

He left Mary in her bed. George went with him, to pull away the furniture barricade at the front door.

Mary realized she wasn't about to lie in bed while Bysshe was outside risking his neck. She threw off the covers and went to the window. Unbarred the shutter, pushed it open slightly.

Wet coursed down her legs.

Bysshe was holding a conversation with a stiff young man in an overcoat. After a few moments, Bysshe returned and reported to George. Mary, feeling like a guilty child, returned to her bed.

"Baron von Strickow — that's Neipperg's second — was taken with your notion of the swordfight *pour la cavalerie,* but insists the fight should be on horseback." He frowned. "They know, of course, that you haven't a horse with you."

"No doubt they'd offer me some nag or other." George thought for a moment. "Very well. I find the notion of a fight on horseback too piquant quite to ignore — tell them that if they insist on such a fight, they must bring forward six saddled horses, and that I will pick mine first, and Neipperg second."

"Very well."

Bysshe returned to the negotiations, and reported back that all had been settled. "With ill grace, as regards your last condition. But he conceded it was fair." Bysshe returned to Mary's room, speaking to George over his shoulder. "Just as well you're doing this on horseback. The yard is wet and slippery — poor footing for sword work."

"I'll try not to do any quick turns on horseback, either." George stepped into the room, gave Mary a glance, then looked at Bysshe. "Your appreciation of our opponents?"

"The Baron was tired and mud-covered. He's been riding hard. I don't imagine the rest of them are any fresher." Bysshe sat by Mary and took her hand. "He wouldn't shake my hand until he found out my father was a baronet. And then I wouldn't shake his."

"Good fellow!"

Bysshe gave a self-congratulatory look. "I believe it put him out of countenance."

George was amused. "These kraut-eaters make me look positively

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democratic." He left to give Pásmány his carbine and pistols — "the better to keep Neipperg honest."

"What of the princess?" Mary wondered. "Do you suppose he will bother to tell her of these efforts on her behalf?"

Shortly thereafter came the sound of the kitchen trap being thrown open, and George's bootheels descending to the cellar. Distant French tones, the sound of female protest, George's calm insistence. Claire's furious shrieks. George's abrupt reply, and then his return to the kitchen.

George appeared in the door, clanking in spurs and with a sword in his hand. Marie-Louise, looking pale, hovered behind him.

Mary looked up at Bysshe. "You won't have to participate in this any longer, will you?"

George answered for him. "I'd be obliged if Mr. Shelley would help me select my horse. Then you can withdraw to the porch — but if there's treachery, be prepared to barricade the door again."

Bysshe nodded. "Very well." He rose and looked out the window. "The horses are coming, along with the Baron and a one- eyed man."

George gave a cursory look out the window. "That's the fellow. He lost the eye at Neerwinden — French sabre cut." His voice turned inward. "I'll try to attack from his blind side — perhaps he'll be weaker there."

Bysshe was more interested in the animals. "There are three white horses. What are they?"

"Lipizzaners of the royal stud," George said. "The Roman Caesars rode 'em, or so the Austrians claim. Small horses by the standard of our English hunters, but strong and very sturdy. Bred and trained for war." He flashed a smile. "They'll do for me, I think."

He stripped off his coat and began to walk toward the door, but recollected, at the last second, the cause of the fight and returned to Marie-Louise. He put his arms around her, murmured something, and kissed her cheek. Then, with a smile, he walked into the other room. Bysshe, deeply unhappy, followed. And then Mary, ignoring the questioning eyes of the Austrian princess, worked her way out of bed and went to the window.

From the window Mary watched as George took his time with the horses, examining each minutely, discoursing on their virtues with Bysshe, checking their shoes and eyes as if he were buying them. The Austrians looked stiff and disapproving. Neipperg was a tall, bull-chested man,

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handsome despite the eyepatch, with a well-tended halo of hair.

Perhaps George dragged the business out in order to nettle his opponent.

George mounted one of the white horses and trotted it round the yard for a brief while, then repeated the experiment with a second Lipizzaner. Then he went back to the first and declared himself satisfied.

Neipperg, seeming even more rigid than before, took the second horse, the one George had rejected. Perhaps it was his own, Mary thought.

Bysshe retreated to the front porch of the farmhouse, Strickow to the barn, and the two horsemen to opposite ends of the yard. Both handled their horses expertly. Bysshe asked each if he were ready, and received a curt nod.

Mary legs trembled. She hoped she wouldn't fall. She had to see it. "*Un,*" Strickow called out in a loud voice. "*Deux. Trois!*" Mary had expected the combatants to dash at each other, but they were too cautious, too professional — instead each goaded his beast into a slow trot and held his sabre with the hilt high, the blade dropping across the body, carefully on guard. Mary noticed that George was approaching on his opponent's blind right side. As they came together there were sudden flashes of silver, too fast for the eye to follow, and the sound of ringing steel.

Then they were past. But Neipperg, as he spurred on, delivered a vicious blind swipe at George's back. Mary cried out, but there was another clang — George had dropped his point behind his back to guard against just that attack.

"Foul blow!" Bysshe cried, from the porch, then clapped his hands. "Good work, George!"

George turned with an intent smile on his face, as if he had the measure of his opponent. There was a cry from elsewhere in the farmhouse, and Claire came running, terror in her eyes. "Are they fighting?" she wailed, and pushed past Mary to get to the window.

Mary tried to pull her back and failed. Her head swam. "You don't want to watch this," she said.

Alba began to cry from the cellar. Claire pushed the shutters wide and thrust her head out.

"Kill him, George!" she shouted. "Kill him!"

George gave no sign of having heard — he and Neipperg were trotting at each other again, and George was crouched down over his horse's neck, his attention wholly on his opponent.

Mary watched over Claire's shoulder as the two approached, as blades

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flashed and clanged — once, twice — and then George thrust to Neipperg's throat and Mary gasped, not just at the pitilessness of it, but at its strange physical consummation, at the way horse and rider and arm and sword, the dart of the blade and momentum of the horse and rider, merged for an instant in an awesome moment of perfection...

Neipperg rode on for a few seconds while blood poured like a tide down his white shirtfront, and then he slumped and fell off his animal like a sack. Mary shivered, knowing she'd just seen a man killed, killed with absolute forethought and deliberation. And George, that intent look still on his face as he watched Neipperg over his shoulder, lowered his scarlet-tipped sword and gave a careless tug of the reins to turn his horse around...

Too careless. The horse balked, then turned too suddenly. Its hind legs slid out from under it on the slick grass, George's arms windmilled as he tried to regain his balance, and the horse, with an almost-human cry, fell heavily on George's right leg.

Claire and Mary cried out. The Lipizzaner's legs flailed in the air as he rolled over on George. Bysshe launched himself off the porch in a run. George began to scream, a sound that raised the hair on Mary's neck.

And, while Adam von Neipperg twitched away his life on the grass, Marie-Louise of Austria, France, and Parma, hearing George's cries of agony, bolted hysterically for the door and ran out onto the yard and into the arms of her countryman.

"NO!" GEORGE INSISTED. "No surgeons!"

Not a word, Mary noted, for the lost Marie-Louise. She watched from the doorway as his friends carried him in and laid him on the kitchen table. The impassive M. Fleury cut the boot away with a pair of shears and tore the leather away with a suddenness that made George gasp. Bysshe peeled away the bloody stocking, and bit his lip at the sight of protruding bone.

"We *must* show this to the surgeon, George," Bysshe said. "The foot and ankle are shattered."

"No!" Sweat beaded on George's forehead. "I've seen surgeons at their work. My God — " There was horror in his eyes. "I'll be a *cripple!*"

M. Fleury said nothing, only looked down at the shattered ankle with his knowing veteran's eyes. He hitched up his trousers, took a bucket from under

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the cutting board, and left to get ice for Mary.

The Austrians were long gone, ridden off with their blonde trophy. Their fallen paladin was still in the yard — he'd only slow down their escape.

George was pale and his skin was clammy. Claire choked back tears as she looked down at him. "Does it hurt very much?"

"Yes," George confessed, "it does. Perhaps Madame Fleury would oblige me with a glass of brandy."

Madame Fleury fetched the jug and some glasses. Pásmány stood in the corner exuding dark Hungarian gloom. George looked up at Mary, seemed surprised to find her out of bed.

"I seem to be unlucky for your little family," he said. "I hope you will forgive me."

"If I can," said Mary.

George smiled. "Truthful Miss Mary. How fine you are." A spasm of pain took him and he gasped. Madame Fleury put some brandy in his hand and he gulped it.

"Mary!" Bysshe rushed to her. "You should not be seeing this. Go back to your bed."

"What difference does it make?" Mary said, feeling the blood streaking her legs; but she allowed herself to be put to bed.

Soon the tub of icewater was ready. It was too big to get through the door into Mary's room, so she had to join George in the kitchen after all. She sat in the cold wet, and Bysshe propped her back with pillows, and they both watched as the water turned red.

George was pale, gulping brandy from the bottle. He looked at Bysshe.

"Perhaps you could take our mind off things," he said. "Perhaps you could tell me one of your ghost stories."

Bysshe could not speak. Tears were running down his face. So to calm him, and to occupy her time when dying, Mary began to tell a story. It was about an empty man, a Swiss baron who was a genius but who lacked any quality of soul. His name, in English, meant the Franked Stone — the stone whose noble birth had paid its way, but which was still a stone, and being a stone unable to know love.

And the baron had a wasting disease, one that caused his limbs to wither and die. And he knew he would soon be a cripple.

Being a genius the baron thought he knew the answer. Out of protoplasm

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and electricity and parts stolen from the graveyard he built another man. He called this man a monster, and held him prisoner. And every time one of the baron's limbs began to wither, he'd arrange for his assistants to cut off one of the monster's limbs, and use it to replace the baron's withered part. The monster's own limb was replaced by one from the graveyard. And the monster went through enormous pain, one hideous surgical procedure after another, but the baron didn't care, because he was whole again and the monster was only a monster, a thing he had created.

But then the monster escaped. He educated himself and grew in understanding and apprehension and he spied on the baron and his family. In revenge the monster killed everyone the baron knew, and the baron was angered not because he loved his family but because the killings were an offense to his pride. So the baron swore revenge on the monster and began to pursue him.

The pursuit took the baron all over the world, but it never ended. At the end the baron pursued the monster to the arctic, and disappeared forever into the ice and mist, into the heart of the white desert of the Pole.

Mary meant the monster to be Soul, of course, and the baron Reason. Because unless the two could unite in sympathy, all was lost in ice and desolation.

It took Mary a long time to tell her story, and she couldn't tell whether George understood her meaning or not. By the time she finished the day was almost over, and her own bleeding had stopped. George had drunk himself nearly insensible, and a diffident notary had arrived from St. Prex to take everyone's testimony.

Mary went back to bed, clean sheets and warmth and the arms of her lover. She and her child would live.

The surgeon came with them, took one look at George's foot, and announced it had to come off.

The surgery was performed on the kitchen table, and George's screams rang for a long time in Mary's dreams.

In a few days Mary had largely recovered. She and Bysshe thanked the Fleurys and sailed to Geneva on a beautiful autumn day in their hired boat. George and Claire — for Claire was George's again — remained behind to sort out George's legal problems. Mary didn't think their friendship would last

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beyond George's immediate recovery, and she hoped that Claire would not return to England heavy with another child.

After another week's recovery in Geneva, Bysshe and Mary headed for England and the financial rescue of Mr. Godwin. Mary had bought a pocketbook and was already filling its pages with her story of the Franked Stone. Bysshe knew any number of publishers, and assured her it would find a home with one of them.

Frankenstein was an immediate success. At one point there were over twenty stage productions going on at once. Though she received no money from the stage adaptations, the book proved a very good seller, and was never out of print. The royalties proved useful in supporting Bysshe and Mary and Claire — once she returned to them, once more with child — during years of wandering, chiefly in Switzerland and Italy.

George's promised thousand pounds a year never materialized.

And the monster, the poor abused charnel creature that was Mary's settlement with death, now stalked through the hearts of all the world.

George went to South America to sell his sword to the revolutionary cause. Mary and Bysshe, reading of his exploits in tattered newspapers sent from England, found it somehow satisfying that he was, at last and however reluctantly, fighting for liberty.

They never saw him again, but Mary thought of him often — the great, famed figure, limping painfully through battle after battle, crippled, ever-restless, and in his breast the arctic waste of the soul, the franked and steely creator with his heart of stone.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HAVE SPECIAL treats in store for you in our December issue. The first is the cover, by Polish artist **Jacek Yerka**. A collection of his work will provide the basis for a new bookfrom Morpheus Press called *Mind Fields*. **Harlan Ellison** has written a story around each painting. We will feature a very special story from the book here, "Susan," a tribute to Harlan's wife.

Also in December, **Jack Williamson** returns with a hard science fiction story, about a man who is one of the last survivors of a Mars colony abandoned by Earth. The protagonist manages to come back to the United States to discover that everything is radically different. He must cope with being a giant among "The Litlins."

Finally, **Richard Bowes** returns with one of his off-beat horror stories. "The Beggar at the Bridge" tells the story of Kevin who daily visits a homeless man on the streets of New York City. The man, a mythic creature in Kevin's mind, guards the bridge between sanity and destruction. Every day, Kevin pays a toll to keep his own life in order. Then, one afternoon, he accidentally misses his payment...

The results of Competition 59, squeezed out of this issue, will also be along in December.

Future issues will feature cover stories from **Carolyn Ives Gilman, Robert Metzger, R. Garcia y Robertson, Robert Reed,** and **Elizabeth Hand. Marc Laidlaw** and **Kit Reed** will provide some of the more off-beat stories of the year. We have other surprises in store, so make certain that you don't miss a copy. Gift and subscription renewal forms are on the reverse page.

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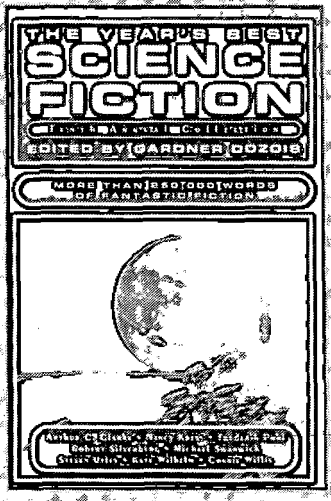

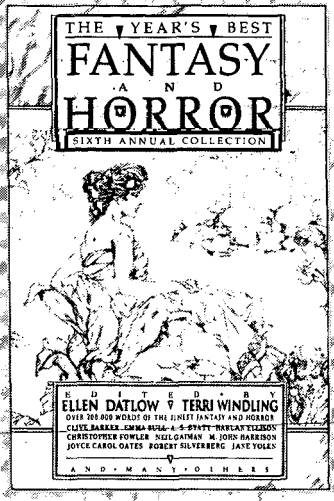

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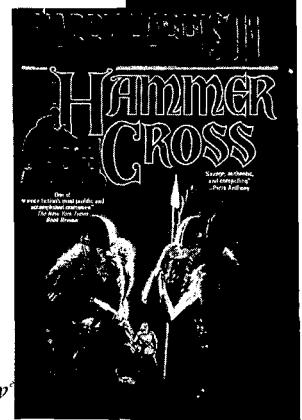

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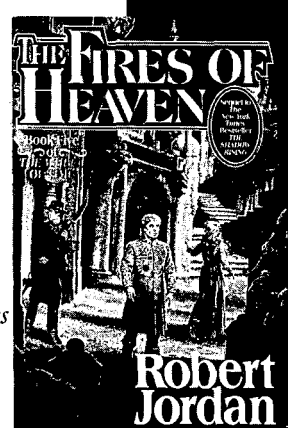

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